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From the moment I started reading this grand old magazine back in the mid-1990s, I had no idea that it would go on to be the cultural touchstone it has become, nor that I would ever get the immense privilege to be editor of it.

After all, PC Gamer has been there through it all. From *Doom* to *Half-Life 2* to this year's seminal *Baldur's Gate III*, this magazine has always been there reporting on PC gaming's biggest events and culture with authority as well as plenty of humour, too.

As such, it is a huge personal honour to present the landmark 30th anniversary issue of PC Gamer magazine. This is a truly great, game-stuffed issue that both celebrates where PC gaming has come from and, even more importantly, where it's going.

Here's to 30 more years of PC gaming!

**ROBERT JONES**
**Twitter**
@rnicholasj
**This month**
Got lost in the PC Gamer magazine archive while digging out past issues. Was berated by Murray the Demonic Talking Skull.

**ROBERT JONES**
PRINT EDITOR
robert.jones@futurenet.com

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## The PC Gamer team

**TYLER WILDE**
**Twitter**
@tyler_wilde
**This month**
Starred in a dating show where everyone wanted to get in his pants. Realised he was just playing *BG III*.

**JODY MACGREGOR**
**Twitter**
@jodymacgregor
**This month**
Went full-on Looney Tunes to murder folk in a white picket fence estate. And then in *Fallout 3* he...

**ROBIN VALENTINE**
**Twitter**
@robinlvalentine
**This month**
Squatted on a bison until it loudly mooed in dissatisfaction. Also played *Dragon's Dogma 2*.

**JACOB RIDLEY**
**Twitter**
@RidleyJG
**This month**
Slept with an Nvidia GeForce 8800 GTX under his pillow. We're starting to get worried.

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# Contents

#390
CHRISTMAS 2023

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## Monitor

**08 THE TOP STORY**
Steam increases security

**10 THE SPY**
New gaming rumours investigated

**12 SPECIAL REPORT**
*Cyberpunk 2077*'s road to redemption

**14 SECRET LEVEL**
The art of writing music for games

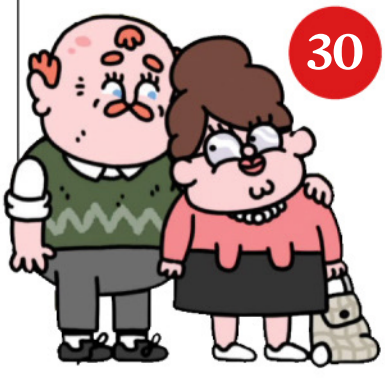
**16 INCOMING**
The hottest games to get excited for

## Previews

18 CoD: Modern Warfare 3
22 EVE Vanguard
24 Capes
26 Dragon's Dogma 2
28 Last Train Home
30 Thank Goodness You're Here!

## Features

34 Nightdive Studios' Star Wars: Dark Forces Remaster
40 Warren Spector talks System Shock
44 Celebrating 30 years of PC Gamer magazine



**18**
### COD: MODERN WARFARE 3
We go hands-on with Activision's latest instalment of the explosive FPS series. Read our early verdict.

**34**
### STAR WARS: DARK FORCES
Robert Jones speaks to Nightdive Studios about its hotly anticipated remaster of *Star Wars: Dark Forces*.

**44**
### 30 YEARS OF PCG MAGAZINE
We speak to former PC Gamer magazine editors, writers and designers about its enduring legacy.

## 66 ASSASSIN'S CREED: MIRAGE

Morgan Park dons his best hood and proceeds to rate Ubisoft's latest stealthy stab-'em-up.

## 94 PC GAMING'S BEST EVER GPUs

The PC Gamer hardware lab looks back at some of the most iconic graphics cards of the last 30 years.

## 124 REINSTALL: SYNDICATE

After 30 years, Ian Evenden reinstalls sci-fi RTS *Syndicate* to see if it is still worth playing today.

# Reviews


66 Assassin's Creed: Mirage
70 Dune: Spice Wars
72 Wargroove 2
74 The Lamplighters League
78 Forza Motorsport
80 Total War: Pharaoh
84 Mineko's Night Market
86 Astrea: Six-Sided Oracles

**FREE GAMES**

88 Babbdi
88 Cyberpet Graveyard
89 Raindrop
89 Spectacle

**THEY'RE BACK**

90 Doom
91 The 7th Guest
91 Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers


# Hardware


94 **GROUP TEST**
100 **TECH REPORT**
102 **TECH TALES**
104 **BUYER'S GUIDE**


# Extra Life


108 **NOW PLAYING**
*Elden Ring, Cyberpunk 2077: Phantom Liberty, Cultic, Starfield*

112 **UPDATE**
*Baldur's Gate III* gets better and better

114 **MOD SPOTLIGHT**
The best *Starfield* mods to improve Bethesda's expansive cosmic RPG

116 **HOW TO**
Make blasting off into deep space easier with these top *Starfield* tips and tricks

118 **DIARY**
A *Baldur's Gate III* bard's tale, part two

122 **WHY I LOVE**
The sinister brilliance of Tranquility Lane, *Fallout 3*'s best quest

124 **REINSTALL**
Cybernetic agents take to the streets in Bullfrog's classic RTS *Syndicate*

128 **MUST PLAY**
*Final Fantasy XIV: Endwalker, Cyberpunk 2077, Solasta, Sekiro, Midnight Suns* and more

The message here is to regularly run an antivirus scan.

# STEAMED UP

## VALVE adds new security check after attackers compromise game devs' Steam accounts

**The Steam accounts of multiple game developers were recently compromised and used to update their games with malware. Fewer than 100 Steam users had the games installed when the malware was added, and they've been directly notified of the risk by email, according to Valve.**

The company confirmed details of the intrusion to PC Gamer. The updates potentially containing malware were "reverted and purged" within hours, and Valve advised any player with the games in question installed to run a full system scan with some decent anti-virus software.

Although this attempt to use Steam to distribute malware wasn't particularly effective, Valve has taken a major step to prevent it from happening again. From October 24, game developers are required to pass a two-factor authentication check before updating the default branch of a released game – the version that Steam will then deliver in an automatic update to most players who have it installed.

**UPDATES WERE "REVERTED AND PURGED" WITHIN HOURS**

### PHONE ALONE

An SMS text message will be the only way to receive the two-factor code, so Steam partners must register a mobile phone number to be used any time they want to update their game's main release version. To developers who don't have a phone, Valve's post about the change says "sorry", but they'll "need a phone or some way to

PHANTOM MYSTERY

## 2077 EASTER EGG

I stumbled right into *Cyberpunk 2077*'s FF06B5 rabbit hole, a recently expanded mystery that's been puzzling the community for years. Real-world maths from 1960, a maze in an arcade cabinet, and an unwinnable game of tic-tac-toe hidden in a QR code. Brain-bending and a ton of fun. ■ ***HR***

PASS OUT

## YOU SHALL NOT GAME PASS

Activision is officially a Microsoft company, but don't fool yourself into believing *COD* and *Diablo* will hit Game Pass any day now. Activision told fans to cool their jets recently, announcing that its games wouldn't hit the service until 2024 at the earliest. Wallets out for *MW3*, then. ■ ***JW***

BUG HUNT

## INSECTOID GPU DEATH

When a repair shop checked inside a dead RTX 4090 to see if it could be fixed, the owners didn't expect the cause of the fault to have six legs and have its segmented body jammed in the GPU. It's worth keeping some Raid handy alongside the canned air if you want to keep your PC safe. ■ ***NE***

**TOP:** Freslon lamented that his game has been presented as a "plague", and asked players to remember that other developers are equally the victims of such attacks.

get text messages" if they want to continue updating their games.

Valve tells PC Gamer that this "extra friction" for partners is a "necessary trade-off for keeping Steam users safe and developers aware of any potential compromise to their account". This recent incident hasn't been the only attempt to gain illegitimate access to Steam partner accounts: Valve says it has seen "an uptick in sophisticated attacks" targeting the accounts of devs who release games on Steam. It's easy to see why: this example may have been small scale and caught quickly, but a system that pushes out automatic updates to potentially thousands of PCs at once.

Steam partners will also need to use SMS verification to add new users to their group, and Valve says that it plans to add the two-factor security check to other Steam backend actions in the future.

One of the games temporarily compromised was *NanoWar: Cells Vs Virus*, whose developer, Benoît Freslon, said on X that he was himself the victim of malware which stole his browser access tokens, giving the attackers temporary access to any web service he was logged into at the time. "I just used my dev account to release the game [a] few hours before the hack I suppose," said Freslon, who went on to re-emphasise that, "Steam removed the corrupted build in a few hours and all games are safe". ■

***Tyler Wilde***

## Highs & Lows

### HIGHS

**I'm a Soulsman**
Three *Elden Ring* devotees are slaying *Dark Souls 3* bosses every day until the DLC arrives.

**Baldur's Great**
*BGIII* players can save Minthara from death by morphing her into a sheep.

**Fortless**
Valve's love for *CS2* has the *TF2* community memeing about an imaginary 10th class.

**Bad Timing**
After laying off over 800 people, Epic tried to lure devs into releasing older titles on its store.

**Red Flag**
*Old School Runescape* player BTCs has been banned over allegations of real-world trading.

**Van Nogh**
The Van Gogh Museum's 'Pokémon Adventure' was hit by scalpers.

### LOWS

# The Spy

## Editor's Note

During production of PC Gamer's first issue, the following letter was found taped to editor Matt Bielby's desk in a plain brown envelope marked, "Do not open until issue 390". While the letter was quickly filed away and forgotten about, the incident did inspire the team to create a regular rumour page, to be written by a local claiming to be a professional. Also this month, The Spy failed to file their column for the first time. As nobody wanted to write this page in The Spy's place we have instead decided to reproduce the letter in full:

**The Spy can't work under these conditions. Right now, in 2023, *GTA* fans have convinced themselves that a *GTA VI* reveal is imminent. Why? The Moon.**

Here's the theory: an image Rockstar released to promote *GTA Online*'s Halloween event featured two characters in front of the San Andreas' Vinewood sign, positioned in such a way that only the V and the I were visible. Also in the picture, the Moon in its waning gibbous phase. This meant that, obviously, more *GTA VI* info would be dropping on October 2, when the Moon next entered that phase. Obviously this didn't happen. The next time the Moon is in its waning gibbous phase is November 1. Naturally, fans are once again primed for a big reveal of Rockstar's upcoming crime caper. And maybe it will happen; probably it won't. By the time you read this, you'll already know, but The Spy won't be around to find out. In sheer desperation at the wild rumours, fan theories and misinformation, The Spy has taken drastic action. The Spy has built a time machine, and travelled back to the year 1993.

**THE SPY**
The Spy is out of time.

### PERFECT PLAN

The Spy figured it was the perfect plan. Who better to write a rumour column than someone who already knows what's going to happen. Look, "id Software will soon start work on the sequel to *Doom*, and will release it in October 1994. This won't mean anything to you yet, as *Doom* itself won't release until December of this year, but when it does, you're going to be very excited about the sequel. Isn't it so expected and normal that a full sequel could be made less than a year after its predecessor's release. Let's all cross our fingers that, in the future, games won't become so big and expensive and difficult to make that fans might be waiting over a decade with no follow-up, leaving them in such desperation that they would attempt to divine a release date announcement from the Moon."

**THE NEXT TIME THE MOON IS IN ITS WANING GIBBOUS PHASE IS NOVEMBER 1**

Easy, right? Admittedly the transition hasn't been as smooth as The Spy had expected. The lack of music streaming services means The Spy is back listening to the radio, which *will not* stop playing Meatloaf's I'd Do Anything for Love (But I Won't Do That). And that's to say nothing of the existential questions. Is The Spy in the same timeline, or has The Spy created a branch universe that will diverge purely as a result of The Spy's presence? Is 1993's The Spy still around, or have they been erased from existence in order to prevent reality collapsing into a paradox? Is this even the first time this has happened, or has The Spy been reliving the same 30 years over and over again in a nightmarish closed loop from which there's no escape? Is the Spy going to go through another embarrassing Britpop phase? What happens next month, and will any of this even be mentioned again? Here's to the future. Spy out. ■

***The Spy***

Do you have what it takes to be a
Loddlenaut
AVAILABLE NOW
STEAM
moon lagoon
SECRET MODE

# Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES

Hit a five-star wanted level and Max-Tac will roll in to stomp you down.

# ALL CHROMED UP

## CYBERPUNK 2077's director takes us inside the three year road to redemption

**When Gabe Amatangelo stepped into the director role for *Cyberpunk 2077* in May 2021, morale among the team was low. The RPG had sold 13 million copies, yet was plagued with bugs and ran so poorly on older consoles it was pulled from sale on the PlayStation Store. CD Projekt's stock price cratered. *Cyberpunk*'s former director had left CDPR after an investigation into workplace bullying. So when Amatangelo said yes to the job, that yes came with conditions.**

"Part of my conversation at the beginning with my boss and the board was: I believe in the team, I believe in this IP, but I want to do it right. And I'm going to need the support to do that," says Amatangelo. "And they're like, yes, you have the support." From that point on, every patch for *Cyberpunk 2077* was a deliberate step along the path to 2.0 and its ultimate redemption – walking away after merely polishing up performance and bugs was never even on the table.

To even reach that point, though, CD Projekt had to begin righting a very large, very ungainly ship. For Amatangelo, that meant making sure everyone on the team was talking to one another and encouraging them to share their ideas. "Everyone, after the launch, was like, 'Oh, if we'd done this differently, or if I'd been able to do this or add this...' I wanted them to not only feel like their voices were heard, but see examples of their voices being heard." They reorganised the development team to be more cross-discipline, putting "pods" of developers together who may have once been separated – a writer and level designer, for example. The first six months of that new structure was "bumpy" but they found a groove.

Amatangelo points to the 2.0 update's revamped police system as a "very visible example" of the collaborative process across tech, art, narrative, and gameplay working. The police now more or less mirror what you'd expect from a *Grand Theft Auto* game, chasing you in vehicles and searching for you with telegraphed vision cones that let you hide until things cool down. More stars trigger an escalated police response, like roadblocks and fearsome Max-Tac bruisers showing up to wreck your day. The NCPD will no longer show up in the middle of the Badlands – Militech show up instead. And they can now also respond to other crimes, not just yours.

Programming more realistic AI behaviours for the police was a key step, but you can see how all those departments working closely together built something more cohesive. The police revamp is one of many changes that stem from one of the team's guiding principles: believability. "Make sure the characters are believable, the

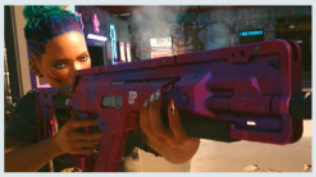
### Cyberpunk 2078?

With *Phantom Liberty*'s excellent reviews, *Cyberpunk 2077* is going out on top: Amatangelo confirmed that with the expansion and 2.0 patch, it's done. "We'll do a little something more, but those are the last big ones," he said. "Then it's *Cyberpunk 2*. Or *Orion*, I should say, whatever we end up naming it." Keep your optics peeled for that codename, netrunners.

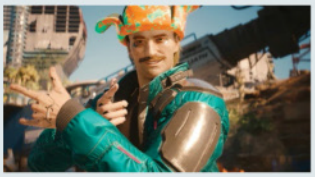
**FAR LEFT:** Just hangin' with *Phantom Liberty* superspy Solomon Reed, nonchalant like.

**LEFT:** *Phantom Liberty*'s Relic skill tree includes powerful new abilities for the monowire, gorilla arms and mantis blades.

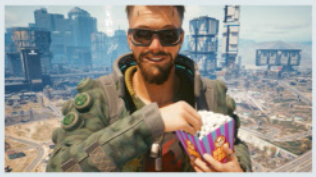
## MEET V *Pumped for 2.0, PC Gamer has unleashed a squad of fresh-save Vs upon Night City*



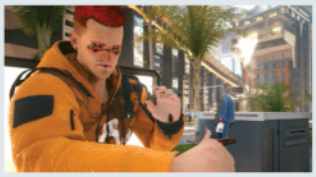
**WES FENLON: MONOWIRE MANSLAUGHTERER**
My V rocks a turquoise bun and recently bonded over beers with Panam.



**MORGAN PARK: BLADED DISASTER**
Can't find a hat that fits right, saved the president, thinks he'll use guns.



**FRASER BROWN: NOMAD PYRO**
My lad is a scruffy fella who definitely smells of sweat, leather and petrol. He enjoys long walks in the desert.



**HARVEY RANDALL: SHANK REDEMPTION**
Loaded with a Sandevistan and enough wavedashes to fill a *Smash* tournament.

narrative is believable, the plot is believable, the world is believable," Amatangelo says. "Obviously it's fiction, but having that believability within the fiction."

Nurturing believability started with the obvious – bugs like characters T-posing and the police spawning right in front of your eyes – then extended into more subtle, significant portions of *Cyberpunk*'s design. "When there's cyberware, it's believable that you can do these enhanced actions, not that you have more hit points," he says. "If you install Gorilla Arms and you can't do things that are strong, that's a believability issue. If your characters don't react to situations in the story in a way that's believable within how you establish that character, that's an issue... so believability was the north star, if you will."

The reworked cyberware and skill systems were designed with fantasy fulfilment in mind first and stats second, which is clearly visible in the new perk trees – many nodes unlock new abilities on the spot or enhance the cyberware you install. Changes to netrunning skills, like the new ability to queue multiple quickhacks, aimed to create more of a "combo" feeling to hacking rather than being held back by cooldowns

### RECALIBRATING

The long-term process of building towards update 2.0 meant rewriting fundamental pieces of *Cyberpunk 2077*'s code, like bits of the game that were "data-driven" rather than "system-driven", which made them much more difficult to change.

**"OBVIOUSLY IT'S FICTION, BUT HAVING THAT BELIEVABILITY WITHIN THE FICTION"**

With NPC behaviour, for example, different actions like walking down the sidewalk or fleeing in terror would be defined in "volumes", and crossing a threshold (say, V using a shotgun to blow someone in half right beside them) would trigger a change between volumes. "These volumes are all set with very specific properties, and if you wanted to change them game-wide, do you have to go through and change 1,000 different things? Or is there a way to do it en-masse?" Amatangelo says.

"That was a lot of the behind-the-scenes stuff. We had to tackle that problem, one-by-one in some cases, and recalibrate our thinking and approach. I'm an advocate for systemic approaches, and found some other advocates within the dev team, and we really pushed systemic approaches across content as much as we could, which then made it possible to do the stuff we did in 2.0."

As difficult as *Cyberpunk 2077*'s launch was, and as low as morale sank in early 2021, it spurred the change CD Projekt Red's developers needed to build the game they'd envisioned from the start.

"Trust is a big thing," Amatangelo says. "And there's a lot of trust, because we were in the trenches together through this. It was a difficult time, and when you're in a difficult time together, there's opportunity to really bond based on a common goal and the spirit of wanting to deliver a great experience... the drive for that allowed everyone to get into a situation where they would trust each other and allow each other to work, and it ends up being a force multiplier." ■

***Wes Fenlon***

# COMPOSE YOURSELF

Award-winning composer **JASON GRAVES** on the process of writing music for games

**Music captured Jason Graves at a young age, and never let him go. After becoming enamoured with John Williams's ET soundtrack, music became "an emotional touchpoint" for him. Singing lessons, piano lessons, and musicals were just the beginning; he's been performing music in one way or another since elementary school.**

Graves went on to learn a variety of instruments, and in college majored in music. "I thought I was going to be an educator or a performer of some sort," he says, "but I decided that what I really wanted to do was attempt to write the kind of music that emotionally charged me as a kid, and even now". Thus he switched from general music study to composition.

Today, Graves is an experienced composer, with an enviable CV that encompasses games, TV, and movies. His game credits include *Dead Space*, *Moss*, *The Dark Pictures* series and the 2013 *Tomb Raider* to name a few. His favourite music to write, he says with a smile, is, "Whatever I wasn't doing the day before!" So how does scoring a game differ from scoring a non-interactive project?

"In many ways, TV and film is a lot easier," he explains. "If someone decides to watch the TV show again, or replay that scene in the film, the music still does the exact same thing. With games, it's interactive, and the player could play that level again and make different choices. The gameplay is going to be different, and the music needs to react accordingly." There's always the same fundamental desire to deliver something emotionally satisfying, but with games, Graves needs to deliver subtly different takes for the same scene. This demands an approach different to that suited for passive media.

## TAKE A BEAT

"Food is always a good analogy for me. So if I were scoring a film, it's like you bake a pizza. Here you go, here's the pizza, and it's all done, right? If you're doing it for a game, you're like, okay, here's the crust. And now here's the three different sauces you can choose from. It's sort of like pizza a la carte, and that way the game developer has choices. They can reassemble it a couple of different ways."

Games also differ from films and TV in that the length of each scene can vary wildly according to player behaviour. One way round that – and how, in fact, the entire *Evolve* soundtrack was composed – is to employ this piecemeal approach. "I will do sort of a suite where I'm not sending an actual finished piece of music," says Jason, "[but I create] a sketch, and then I take all the parts and send them to the developer; and then the game is programmed so that it's triggering certain musical events depending on what's happening in the game. A lot of times [this] works really well for exploration."

## TAILORED SUITE

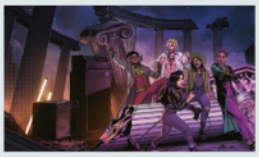
In order to create music that suits the game, Jason will explore early builds, artwork, scripts; anything and everything that he can get his hands on. "The wonderful thing about games is – if you're talking about a new game, and not a franchise – the developers are building this world from scratch. So I feel like it's important to be in the same headspace that the developer has probably been in for a year, or two, or maybe even three."

Graves modestly but firmly asserts that composing music is, for him at least, a collaborative process with the client. "It's very much, 'What can we do together?' I think it's important to have those relationships and that creative kind of talk, and the emotional underscoring of things. Because just throwing sounds at the wall and trying to see what's going to happen is not going to elicit the sort of emotional response that a team who spent five years on a project is looking for." ■

***Luke Kemp***

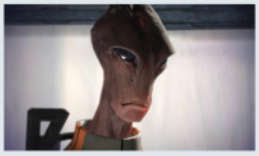
## HEAR YE HEAR YE

***Another four legendary composers***



**AUSTIN WINTORY**
As well as *Stray Gods*, Wintory has worked on *Journey*, *The Banner Saga* and *The Pathless*.

**JESPER KYD**
Kyd has scored multiple *Assassin's Creed*, *Borderlands*, *Hitman* and *Warhammer* games.

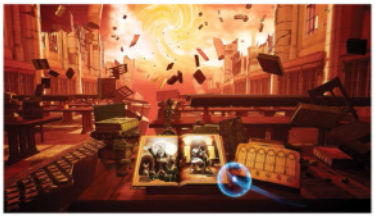


**RICHARD JACQUES**
*Mass Effect*, *Overwatch 2* and *Jet Set Radio* have all benefited from Jacques' talent.

**AKIRA YAMAOKA**
Best known for his work on the *Silent Hill* series, which wouldn't be the same without his music.

# "I THOUGHT I WAS GOING TO BE AN EDUCATOR OR A PERFORMER"

"I've been hiring lots of musicians who record themselves at home," says Graves.



**ABOVE:** Each entry in *The Dark Pictures* features music from Graves.

**LEFT:** Graves wrote the music for the cult classic *Alpha Protocol*.

# Incoming

THE BIGGEST GAMES ON THE WAY

## 1 month

### AVATAR: FRONTIERS OF PANDORA

**RELEASE** December 7, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Massive Entertainment

With *Far Cry*-style first-person combat as well as third-person adventuring and beast-riding, this open-world action adventure is going big.

### SIGIL II

**RELEASE** December 10, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Romero Games

John Romero returns with a follow-up to his 2019 original *Doom* expansion, *SIGIL*. Expect a new campaign with even more ingeniously designed levels.

### WARHAMMER 40,000: SPACE MARINE 2

**RELEASE** 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Saber Interactive

It's time to grab your chainsword and thunder hammer, and get rending and crushing orks, tyranids and more. Action-packed sequel incoming soon.

## 3 months

### PACIFIC DRIVE

**RELEASE** Q1, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Ironwood Studios

Drive to survive in this run-based driving adventure. Scavenge resources from the anomaly-filled Olympic Exclusion Zone, upgrade your car and complete missions.

### HOMEWORLD 3

**RELEASE** February, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Blackbird Interactive

The new game in the classic sci-fi series has slipped out of 2023 into 2024, but still promises to deliver a stunning space-based RTS. Incoming in February 2024.

### NIGHTINGALE

**RELEASE** February 22, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Inflexion Games

Explore, craft, fight and survive in dangerous Fae Realms either on your own or with friends. You play as a Realmwalker in this visually punchy fantasy world.

# 6 months

## ARK 2

**RELEASE** Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Studio Wildcard

The *Ark* series returns with Vin Diesel-voiced hero Santiago attempting to protect his daughter, Meeka, while surviving in a world dominated by dinosaurs.

## STALKER 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL

**RELEASE** 2024 | **DEVELOPER** GSC Game World

The long-delayed *STALKER 2* has slipped once more, out of 2023 and into 2024. We were impressed with it at this year's Gamescom, though, so keep the faith.

## FROSTPUNK 2

**RELEASE** 2024 | **DEVELOPER** 11 bit studios

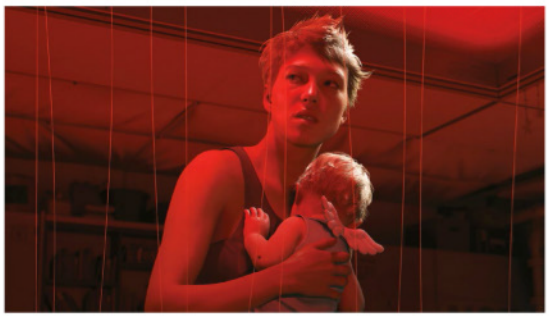
We were intrigued when we saw the sequel to the hit society survival game at Gamescom. Difficult decisions and deep strategy await the player in this grim world.

# 12 months+

## VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - BLOODLINES 2

**RELEASE** Autumn 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Paradox Interactive

With its original developer binned off in 2021, *Bloodlines 2* now rises from *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* dev The Chinese Room, and there's even a trailer.



## DEATH STRANDING 2

**RELEASE** Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Kojima Productions

The sequel to Hideo Kojima's critically acclaimed action adventure game/walking simulator *Death Stranding* is incoming, but with no fixed release date so far.

## MECHWARRIOR 5: CLANS

**RELEASE** 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Piranha Games Inc

Fight for freedom in 100 tonnes of death-dealing fury. Pilot a huge stompy mech, customise it as you see fit, and enjoy new narrative-rich missions.

**MOD**

### FIXING STARFIELD

Talented modder m8r98a4f2 has released two must-have *Starfield* mods. *StarUI Inventory* turns your unwieldy bags of stuff into a lovely clean list that can be sorted by type, weight, and value, while *StarUI HUD* overhauls the existing UI and gives you control over HUD widgets, an updated loot list, and improved item cards with stats like DPS and the value/weight ratio. Grab them now at bit.ly/StarUI.

*Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*

**NEED TO KNOW**

| RELEASE | DEVELOPER | PUBLISHER | LINK |
|---|---|---|---|
| November 10 | Sledgehammer Games | Activision | callofduty.com |

# CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE 3

## This year, *Call of Duty* asks: is nostalgia worth £70?

**In 20 years of *Call of Duty* baton-passing, *Modern Warfare 3* presents a unique opportunity for persnickety fans like myself: Sledgehammer has been entrusted a direct sequel to Infinity Ward's *Modern Warfare 2* reboot just a year after its release, with the same engine and full backwards compatibility with *MW2*'s guns and attachments.**

I imagine this is a pretty big deal for Sledgehammer. The Bay Area studio has spent a decade playing third fiddle to its more senior Infinity Ward and Treyarch collaborators, serving as a support studio when necessary and garnering a reputation as the "offbeat" *CoD* studio with *Advanced Warfare* (2014), *WW2* (2017), and *Vanguard* (2021) – all entries that tried to reach beyond where *CoD* was, and either fell flat or didn't make a significant mark in series canon. Simply by being a *Modern Warfare* game, *MW3* is the studio's highest-profile project ever.

After a few days playing *Modern Warfare 3*'s multiplayer beta, it might also prove to be the strangest *CoD* package in years. The beta was essentially a tasting menu of *MW3*'s full-course nostalgia for the original 2009 *Modern Warfare 2*.

### FAMILIAR SIGHTS

Yes, it's a confusing pretzel of sequels and recursive reboots, but the takeaway is that Activision is betting big on players wanting to relive a well-remembered *CoD* from 14 years ago, so much so that it's willing to forgo *MW3* having any real identity of its own. Instead of having original multiplayer maps, *MW3* will only feature remakes of *MW2* (2009) maps at launch. During the beta, I've played five: Favela, Skidrow, Rust, Highrise and Estate.

It's a little embarrassing to admit, but yeah, the nostalgia is working. I played a whole lot of *MW2* in 2009, as you do when you're 13 and most of your friends are online too, so it's not surprising that these maps are still branded into my brain. Sprinting down the centre lane of Highrise gave me the same sentimental rush I get when I drive by my old middle school. Sledgehammer clearly understands the assignment – modernise, but preserve the map's visual identity – and I think it's so far nailed it, with the exception of Favela. *MW3* Favela doesn't quite replicate 2009's dingy art style: the new one is cleaner, brighter, and more saturated. That's an entirely valid interpretation of Favela that I like just fine, but it does stand out next to Estate and Rust, which are so faithful to their originals that they stop feeling like remakes and just become those maps.

PLAYED IT

And hey... some of those maps kinda sucked, huh? It was bold of Sledgehammer to toss Estate into the mix so early on, because ten minutes on that map reminded me why I voted against it every time it came up in 2009. Why is three-quarters of Estate a featureless hill, and why do I always seem to spawn at the bottom of it? Every *CoD* has some stinkers in the map pool, but it's a slightly harder pill to swallow when we're talking about an old nemesis I thought I'd never have to see again.

I'm not thrilled that map voting is back either – sure, it can mean that a united lobby of 12 can give bad maps like Estate the collective middle finger, but it also means maps that are bad for other reasons, like Rust, win out every single time. At least it's easy to duck out and try again before the match starts.

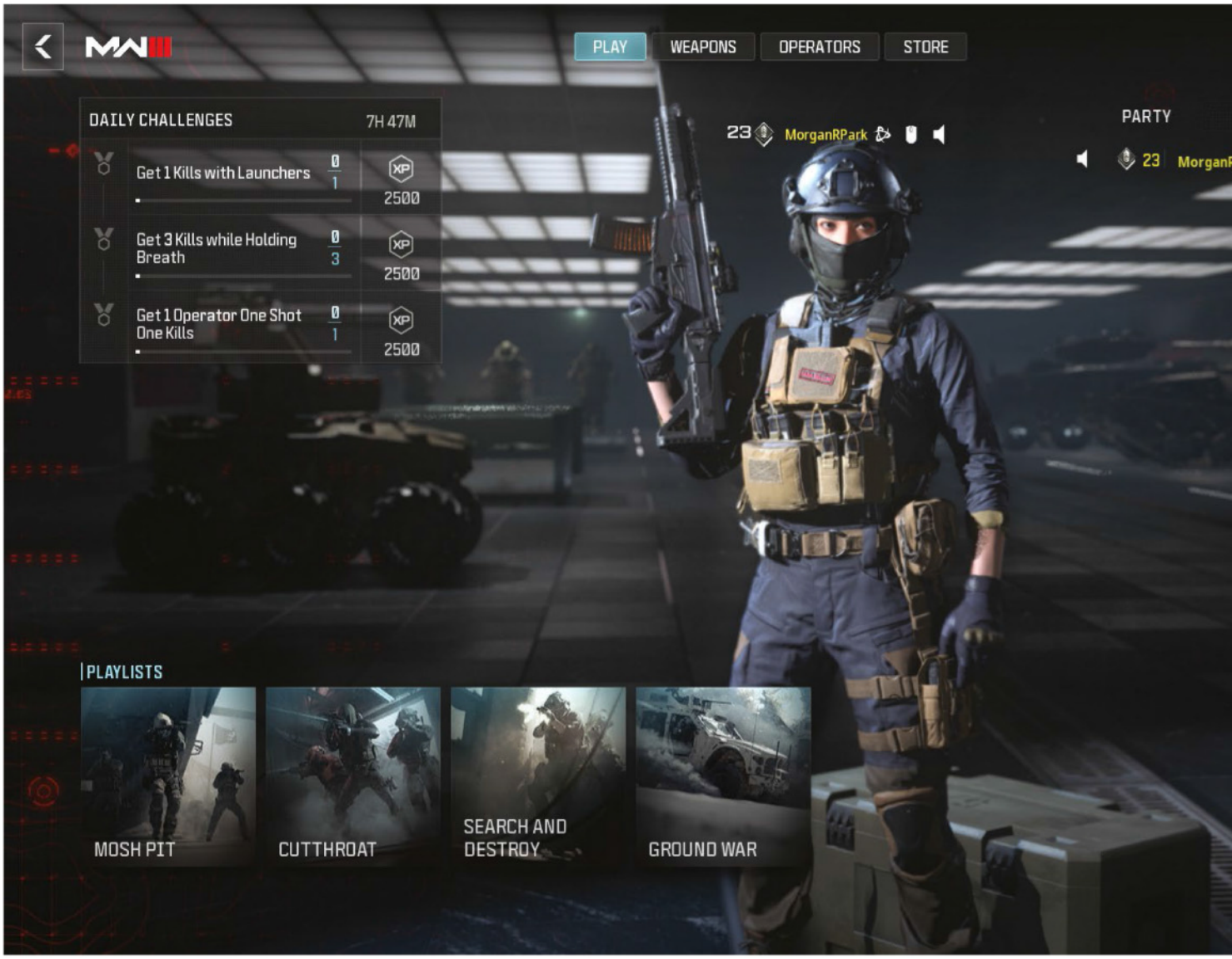
### THE LITTLE THINGS

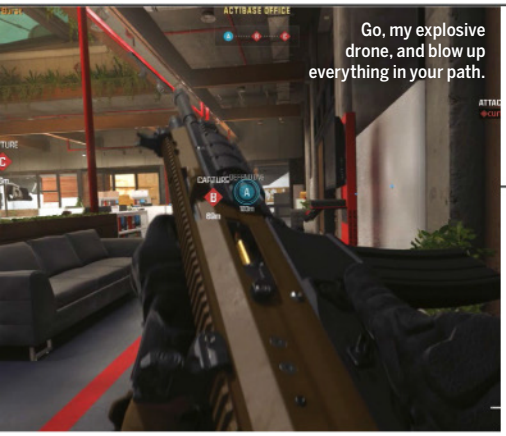
While *MW3* maps are meant to imitate Infinity Ward circa 2009, Sledgehammer has charted its own path with major adjustments to movement and recoil.

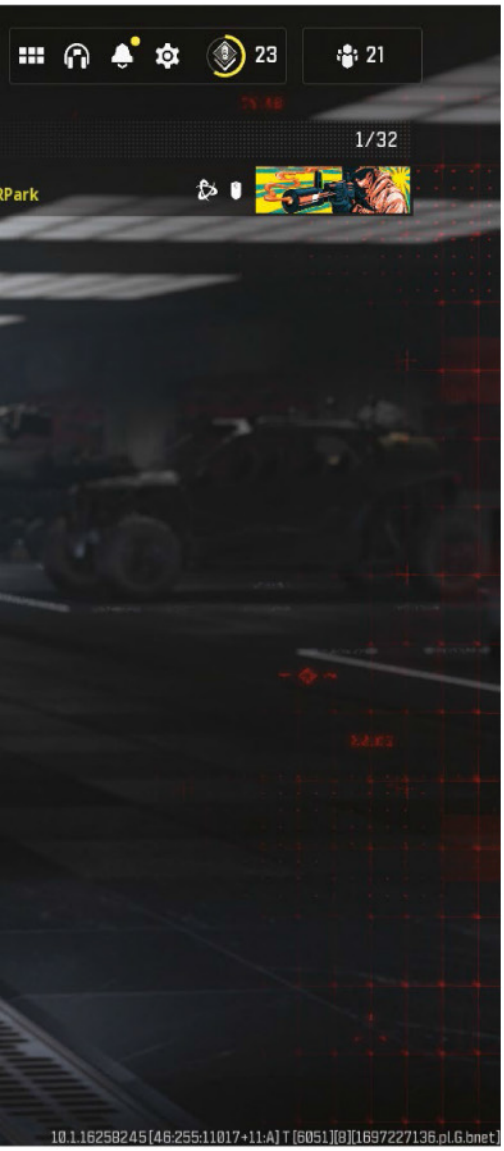
**SLEDGEHAMMER HAS CHARTED ITS OWN PATH, WITH MAJOR ADJUSTMENTS TO MOVEMENT**

**RIGHT:** Executions are back in *MW3*, and they're still good.

**BELOW:** *Modern Warfare 3*'s menus are a real step up from last year's boxy, Hulu-adjacent interface.







Players can once again slide cancel, everyone has 50% more health, and red pings are back on the minimap, undoing key changes Infinity Ward made in 2022 to deliberately slow down the action.

It's too early to measure the effect these changes will have, but after a couple of days, I suspect they don't make a huge difference for the average player. As much as *CoD* content creators love their bunny hopping and slide cancelling, most players don't actually do that stuff, which is nice. My matches have all been very familiar to the game I've been playing for the past year – unsurprising considering this year's multiplayer is essentially an expansion.

It's fascinating to watch two artists work from the exact same prompt. So much of *MW3* has been lifted from *MW2* unchanged, yet Sledgehammer's fingerprints are all over this thing.

## SOUND CHECK

Two decades of yearly *CoD*s have trained us to notice and care about really small stuff that I don't think twice about in other games. The way guns look, how they sound, kick, reload – this is where Sledgehammer leaves its clearest mark, and where *MW3* might be taking a few steps back from last year. Sledgehammer has definitely upped its craft since *Vanguard*'s wimpy rifles almost completely put me off that game. The new *MW3* guns are decently punchy and I really like holding a classic UMP again, but they don't compare to *MW2* (2022).

Infinity Ward guns are so loud and concussive that I have to turn the game down to hear friends on Discord. Sledgehammer gun sounds are weaker. Honestly, it's hardly a fair fight. *Modern Warfare 2* has some of the sharpest, ear-ringing gunfeel in any FPS I've played and ludicrously detailed animations that are honestly overkill. These beta guns don't have as much flair, but depending on who you are, that could be a good thing.

One reason *MW3* guns seem weaker is because the time-to-kill has gone up dramatically. I miss the lower TTK, but the extra HP does give me wiggle room to escape gunfights I'm losing. I've also noticed less recoil across the board and almost no visual recoil (the kind where your reticle bounces around off-centre while firing), which has made every gun I've tried so far feel like a laser beam.

**I'M ALSO THOROUGHLY UNIMPRESSED BY THE CHOICE OF OPTICS SO FAR**

## GUNSMITH

Maybe the guns that aren't in the beta will have steeper recoil curves, but that last note isn't encouraging as someone who enjoys tuning weapons in Gunsmith. I outfitted my MCW (a reimagining of the popular ACR from 2009) with two attachments and already feel like anything more would be redundant. Unless I want to slap a silencer on it or extend the magazine, it's pretty much a solved gun.

That probably says more about a general Gunsmith bloat problem that's been around for a few *CoD*s now: there are tragically few attachments that meaningfully affect how a gun behaves, and piles of grips, stocks, and muzzles that do basically the same thing. There are 18 different options to get slightly less weapon kick or higher bullet velocity, and yet the most interesting attachment I've unlocked so far is the same pistol quickdraw grip I loved in *MW* mostly because it looks cool to draw your gun like John Wick. I'm also thoroughly unimpressed by the choice of optics so far. A lot of the simple red dots are kinda ugly and I'm not seeing as many medium laser sight options, though the final game will probably have more.

Sledgehammer says some guns will have conversion kits that more meaningfully transform a gun's behaviour. The first one shown is a kit that adds an SMG framework to the Renetti pistol to make it fully-auto. That sounds very cool, but unfortunately, Sledgehammer plans to tie conversion kits to time-limited challenge windows. You can't get the carrot without the stick in *CoD* these days.

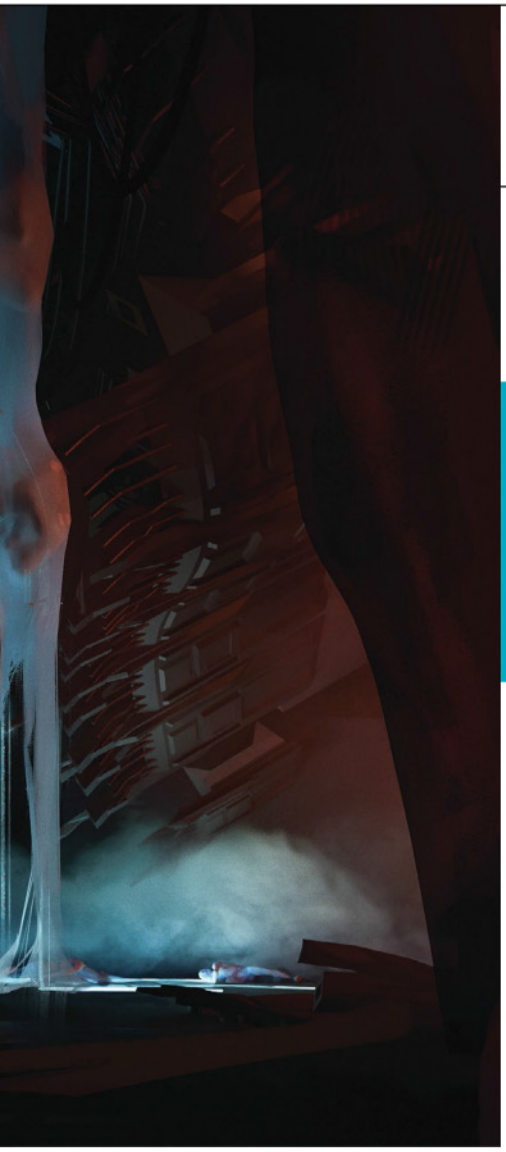
I often wonder if holding all of these hyper-specific preferences about TTK, optic aesthetics, and gunfeel is a sign I've gone off the deep end with *CoD* or I'm resistant to change, but I think it's more about acknowledging that, despite reasonable criticisms that this series is the same every year, who makes your *Call of Duty* really matters. I think Infinity Ward puts a little extra love in that I don't tend to see in Sledgehammer or Treyarch games, and that's fine. For the same reason I'm bummed when my favourite burrito place is closed and I have to settle for a near-identical one down the street, the *MW3* beta is bittersweet. I'm having fun, but it's not quite the same.

*Morgan Park*

*EVE Vanguard*

**ABOVE:** *EVE Vanguard*'s name comes from its protagonists: the Vanguard are vat-grown war clones sent onto planetary surfaces to scavenge wrecks and shoot other Vanguard.

**RIGHT:** The visual style is going for a degree of eyes-on realism within the sci-fi setting, steering away from conventions such as lens flares and chromatic aberration.



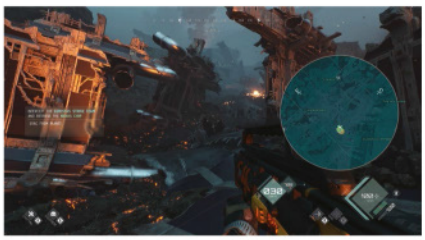
**NEED TO KNOW**

| RELEASE | DEVELOPER | PUBLISHER | LINK |
|---|---|---|---|
| December 2023 | CCP London | CCP Games | vanguard.eveonline.com |

# EVE VANGUARD

## From the stars... all the way down to the salvage

**Ever since FPS *Dust 514*'s 2013 debut and subsequent flaming out, a sizeable segment of *EVE Online* fans have wanted one thing: *Dust 2*. The idea is something of a white whale for developer CCP: a first-person shooter that inhabits the same universe as its space MMO. *EVE Vanguard* is not *Dust 2*, however, because this time things have to be different.**



CCP is being extra cautious about how it frames *Vanguard*. This is a "module" of *EVE Online* being developed by CCP's London studio in Unreal Engine 5, which will open its doors for a beta test in December 2023, and be asynchronously connected to *EVE Online* via a mechanic called corruption.

The difference with *Vanguard* is that it's designed on the core *EVE Online* principle of a sandbox experience where goals can shift, temporary alliances can form, and players have a degree of agency over their goals. The basic setup is multiple player teams chasing similar objectives on one enormous map, which itself is dotted with enemy NPCs and objectives.

To demonstrate, CCP London developers played through a *Vanguard* mission as a team of three, starting on the approach to a ship's wreckage in search of a Nexus Chip, this mission's bounty.

The team enters the carcass, taking out NPCs on the way, and it's clear that the gunfeel here is leagues ahead of *Dust 514*. Aiming down the sights has a neat visual effect of highlighting enemies, and each shot punches out of the gun with heft: enemies go down quickly, and concentrated fire is witheringly effective.

**AIMING DOWN THE SIGHTS HAS A NEAT VISUAL EFFECT OF HIGHLIGHTING ENEMIES**

The players find the pirates they're looking for in the ship's bowels, and a firefight begins, with one member of the team using the wreckage to flank. The enemies are soon wiped, but another team has already seized the bounty.

### DUSTED

*Vanguard* then begins to bring the different player teams together. The chip thieves haven't travelled too far, and in their desire to escape aren't paying attention: they're easily ambushed and go down quickly. With the objective secured, our heroes then try to extract themselves, which is done through a mechanic of a timed beacon visible to other players.

The team set up to defend, but have made a rookie error: they're on low ground. Soon after, another enemy team appears on the horizon and begins taking potshots. Our doomed crew return fire but they're sitting ducks, and all three are soon wiped. The demo took maybe ten minutes, and it doesn't feel like there's been any downtime.

FIRST LOOK

The players could respawn with a new clone, though on this occasion they don't. There's also an element of permanence to dying which isn't fully explained: players can apparently pay to have a perfect clone of themselves ready to respawn, or be revived by their teammates, but outside of those fallbacks you can lose certain stuff permanently.

The most exciting promise, however, comes with the nature of *Vanguard* itself. It's about scavenger hunts on and around massive wrecks: *EVE Online* is (in part) about massive spaceship battles. CCP reckons that, with its async connection to the MMO, it can eventually reach a stage in *Vanguard* where these battles are reflected in some way: that is, if a Titan goes down in a given system in *EVE*, you can boot up *Vanguard* some time afterwards and fight over that ship's wreckage. It's one hell of a promise.

What is clear is that CCP wants to make an *EVE* FPS that works alongside *EVE*. "This is what we always meant to make," says *EVE Online* director Snorri Arnarson, "it just took this long".

*Rich Stanton*

**NEED TO KNOW**

| RELEASE | DEVELOPER | PUBLISHER | LINK |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2024 | Spitfire Interactive | Daedalic Entertainment | spitfireinteractive.com.au |

# CAPES

## Edna Mode would not approve

**What superhero movies often don't show you are the back-street scuffles and brawls against androids in warehouses that take up so much of a crimefighter's time. *Capes*, a turn-based tactics game, revels in these moments, giving a lower-stakes feel to things as you batter the bad guys.**

*Capes* follows a similar path to that of *XCOM 2*, in that it rises out of defeat. The story goes that, 20 years ago, superheroes lost their war against supervillains. Having and using superpowers is now a crime, a law enforced by a mysterious 'Company' whose operatives are uniformly bald. *Capes* casts you as an unseen overlord, controlling a team of new superheroes in their attempts to win back the city via turn-based combat.

Spitfire Interactive is headed up by former Sega and Gameloft designer Cade Franklin. The game's art director is Shawn Eustace, the man behind the look of *Destroy All Humans*, a fun romp about shooting people up the bottom to remove their brains. *Capes* suffers slightly from having two art styles, a personality-filled comic-book 2D one in cutscenes, and the blank 3D look of its missions, which while it could charitably be interpreted as playing with shiny plastic toys inspired by the comics, instead looks like a step backwards.

Still, there is at least some nice characterisation going on. A favourite so far is Mindfire, a wheelchair user who lives with his mother and is a blend of Professor X and Magneto. During a Company operation to capture him a pair of heroes end up recruiting him instead, and he levitates out of his chair to become a major damage dealer, making enemies vulnerable to attack before flinging rocks at them, or teaming up with Facet to send a barrage of crystals their way.

**CASTS YOU AS AN UNSEEN OVERLORD, CONTROLLING A TEAM OF NEW SUPERHEROES**

PLAYED IT

### HOLDING OUT

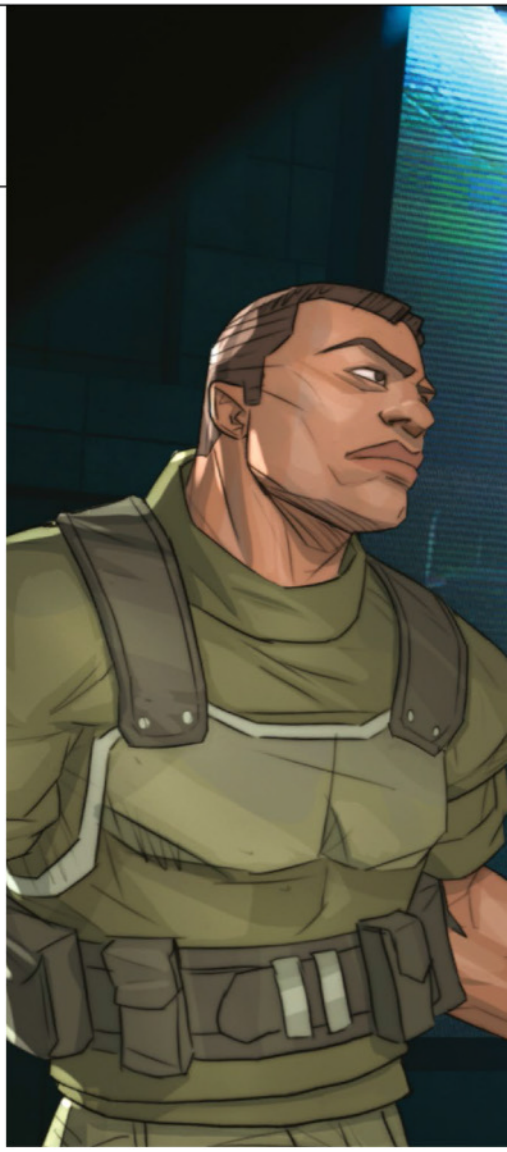
Being able to join with nearby allies for enhanced attacks is a big part of *Capes*' battles. You have a disarm attack that knocks the weapon from a Company man's hand, be that a gun or iron pipe, leaving them with their fists. Facet can taunt them to concentrate their attacks on him, and protect himself or others with a coating of crystals. Rebound can teleport herself and others, and as you get bonus damage from attacks that land from behind, suddenly appearing for a backstab is a good way to surprise foes.

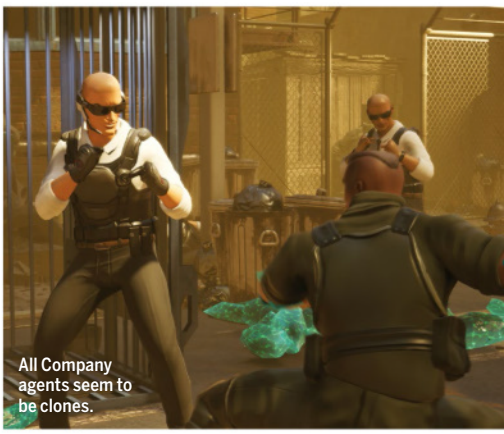
Positioning for an attack is everything, as many ranged powers only work in orthogonal lines from the hero's position and can only travel a few squares. The interface separates movement and actions, so as long as you have enough points in each you can move, hit, move and perhaps disarm all in the same turn. Unused points go toward charging a super move that offers an attack against all enemies, such as Weathervane's ability to chuck lightning bolts. Moves can't be upgraded in the demo, but eventually you'll be able to distribute points to power them up.

Red explosive barrels are scattered liberally around, causing fires when they're hit that can catch anyone, enemy or friendly, alight. Dropped enemies are out of the game, but if one of our heroes goes down they can be revived by moving a teammate next to them.

*Capes* has a lighter feel than the heavy, world-ending scenarios beloved of tactics games, and this feeds through to the presentation, with comic-book style speech bubbles, mysterious shrouded figures right out of Marvel movies, and room-shaking superpowers. It will need to provide a bit more depth than what's on offer in this demo, however, if it's to fly free from turn-based mediocrity.

*Ian Evenden*





All Company agents seem to be clones.

**ABOVE:** The 2D art designs are full of personality.

**LEFT:** Weathervane lives up to his name.

*Dragon's Dogma 2*

**ABOVE:** Crotch shot, activate!

**RIGHT:** The game is genuinely gorgeous, with sprawling vistas.

**NEED TO KNOW**

| RELEASE | DEVELOPER | PUBLISHER | LINK |
|---|---|---|---|
| TBA | Capcom | Capcom | shorturl.at/jtIX4 |

# DRAGON'S DOGMA 2

## If strapping a bomb to a troll is wrong, I don't want to be right

**There really is no RPG quite like *Dragon's Dogma*. It's a big, weird, wonderful, terrifying, enthralling mess of an adventure that demands you meet it on its own bizarre terms, or else get savaged by wolves in the middle of the night. What a delight, then, to find a sequel more in love with its own brilliantly strange identity than ever.**

The thing I loved most about the first game was its sense of truly journeying across a fantasy land, so I decided the best way to get a sense of the sequel in the limited time available was to just pick a road and start walking. I'm not alone, of course – I'm joined by the series' trademark Pawns, AI companions created by yourself and other players that aid you on your journey. As soon as they open their mouths, I'm reassured. As in the first game, they're a talkative bunch: offering advice on what to do next, calling for help in battle, pointing out resources, and more.

Inarguably, they pipe up too much, and I wouldn't blame anyone for deciding they're irritating, but I find their endless commentary hugely endearing. With more nuanced and varied things to say in this sequel, more than ever it evokes the feeling of going on an adventure with your friends. Even just in the hour or so I spend with them, their personalities emerge – from a grumpy fighter tired of my frequent diversions to a confident healer nicely but firmly herding me along towards points of interest.

**THE FIRST GAME HAD A CHARM TO ITS VISUALS, BUT THE SEQUEL IS GORGEOUS**

On paper, nothing I find on my little trek is that exciting – I get ambushed by some monsters, find a raided village, and delve into a mine overrun with goblins – but the game shines in the details. The first game had a wonderful physicality, and *Dragon's Dogma 2* runs with it. When a weakened enemy stumbles in front of me, I scoop him up in my arms and hurl him at one of his mates, knocking them both off a cliffside. Seeing a group of goblins charge across a rope bridge, I cut the supports, sending them plummeting down into the abyss. In battle with a troll, I leap and climb up onto its back, attach a mine to its neck, and jump off to safety as it explodes.

### VIP LIFTER

It's ripe for slapstick comedy, of course – other stops along my journey include carrying a squealing pig off his farm and down the road until he wriggles out of my arms, climbing on top of a passing bison and squatting over her until she moos with dissatisfaction, and heaving the distinguished NPC I'm escorting over my shoulder to get him past some difficult terrain more quicker. But beyond the goofiness, that ability to grab onto and interact with all these things around you gives the world a physical reality rare in RPGs.

PLAYED IT

Perhaps the most obvious improvement, however, is in *Dragon's Dogma 2*'s looks. The first game had a charm to its visuals, but it wasn't winning any beauty contests; the sequel is genuinely gorgeous, with particular attention paid to its sprawling vistas. As I stop at a campfire in an abandoned village to sleep through the dangerous night, I throw some ratty cut of meat in a skillet and I'm stunned by the most unexpectedly beautiful thing in the game: an animation of my dinner frying. As the ludicrously high-def chop sizzles, intricately realised fat bubbling out of it, I can't help but grin. Why have they put so much effort into this one thing, when cooking isn't even a major part of the game? Because this is still a series that plays by no one's logic but its own, and its unique identity shines through as clearly in that frying pan as it does in every road walked, every goblin hurled and every troll triumphantly exploded.

*Robin Valentine*

Is there anything the BBC won't get Attenborough to do?

**NEED TO KNOW**

| RELEASE | DEVELOPER | PUBLISHER | LINK |
|---|---|---|---|
| November 28, 2023 | Ashborne Games | THQ Nordic | lasttrainhome.thqnordic.com |

# LAST TRAIN HOME

## Historical strategy hybrid is on the right track

**In the year 1918, Czechoslovakia was born from the ashes of the First World War. That same year, Russia collapsed into a vicious civil war. It was a complex, messy and bloody time, and is the ambitiously chosen backdrop for *Last Train Home*, from Czech studio Ashborne Games.**

The demo for *Last Train Home* features the prologue and first leg of the full game's exodus, around three to four hours of game. I dived in this week to get a feel for whether the studio could pull off such an ambitious concept. I'm very happy to report that, aside from micromanagement relying a bit too much on fiddly UI panels, this is shaping up to be a very compelling blend of genres, and a handsome-looking game too.

PLAYED IT

Rather than stick with familiar conflicts or immediately intuitive mechanics, this historical strategy game tackles an ethically and politically difficult scenario, focusing on the human drama of it. As the commander of a Czechoslovakian Legion unit operating out of an armoured train, your war is over, and your mission is to leave Russia and get your soldiers to their new home.

This is complicated somewhat by Russia collapsing in on itself, both Red and White armies being suspicious of an independent force in their war zone, plus orders from your precariously defended home telling you to remain neutral even as hostilities escalate. It's a minefield, and Ashborne has seemingly chosen *The Banner Saga* and *Frostpunk* as inspirations – games of tough moral choices and resource management.

**BATTLES REQUIRE SPLITTING YOUR FORCES, LURING ENEMIES OUT INTO AMBUSHES**

*Last Train Home* looks to only offer mild path branching, but plenty of choice in how you handle its individual story beats. Every member of your train crew has a range of personal quirks, from political alignments (religious, nationalist, socialist, etc) to traits like being good at haggling, blunt in conversation or just plain unlucky, all coming into play as you send squads out to scout villages, harvest food and deal with traders while your train stops to repair and upgrade.

While resource starvation isn't a major threat in the demo, there's still plenty of room for costly mistakes through the handful of combat missions in this early segment. Every tactical misstep leads to lost time and resources healing the wounded, burning through limited stocks of grenades and medical kits, or outright losing precious troops.

### COMPANY OF COMMANDOS

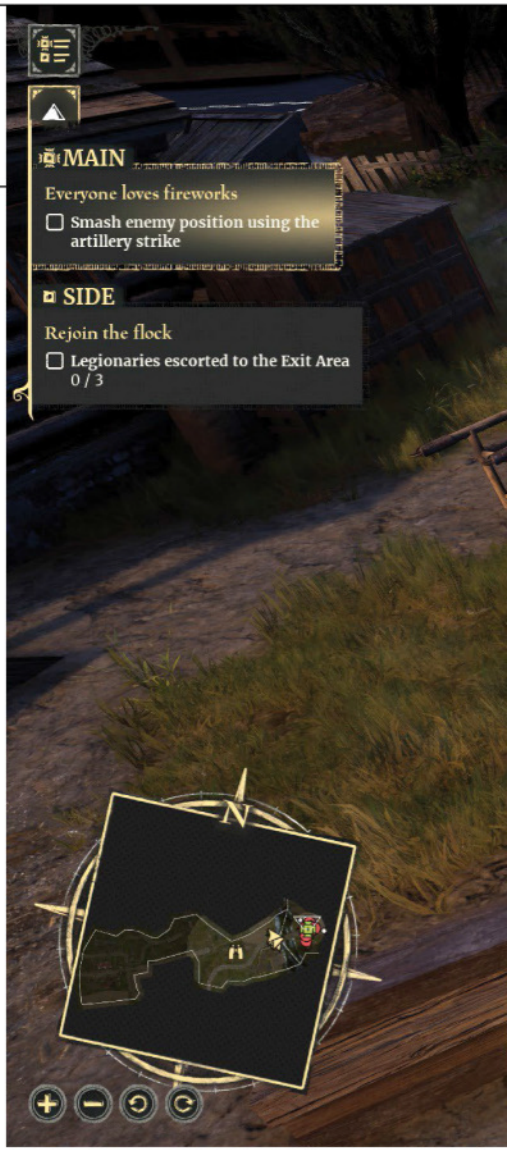
As such, it pays to play it carefully in *Last Train Home*'s second component; a pausable real-time strategy game that splits the difference between *Company Of Heroes*' suppress-and-flank flow and the stealthy sight-cone dodging of the *Commandos* series. Unlike *CoH* and its swarms of expendable infantry, you get to deploy up to ten of your finest from the train to handle these scripted, often multi-phase encounters.

Battles often require splitting your forces, luring enemies out into ambushes and scouring the map for resources to even out the cost of munitions and medicine that you'll be burning.

Thankfully, on the default difficulty, troops are merely knocked out by enemy fire and won't bleed out immediately, giving you a chance to rush in to revive them, but I'm already excited to try the full game on Hard mode, which makes your soldiers every bit as vulnerable to sudden death by lead intake as enemy grunts.

As a fan of *The Banner Saga*'s darker story branches and *XCOM* in ironman mode, I'm fully sold on *Last Train Home*, and hungry to see just how hard the full game is willing to push me, my troops and my tactics on this gruelling journey home.

*Dominic Tarason*

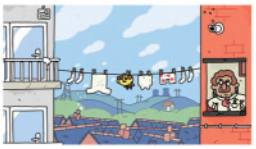


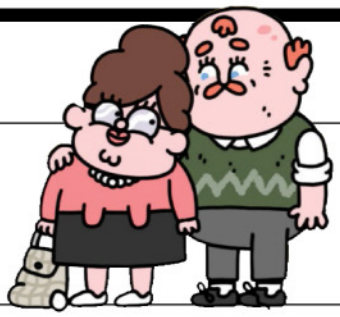
If you zoom the train map in close, there's a surprising amount of detailed scenery.

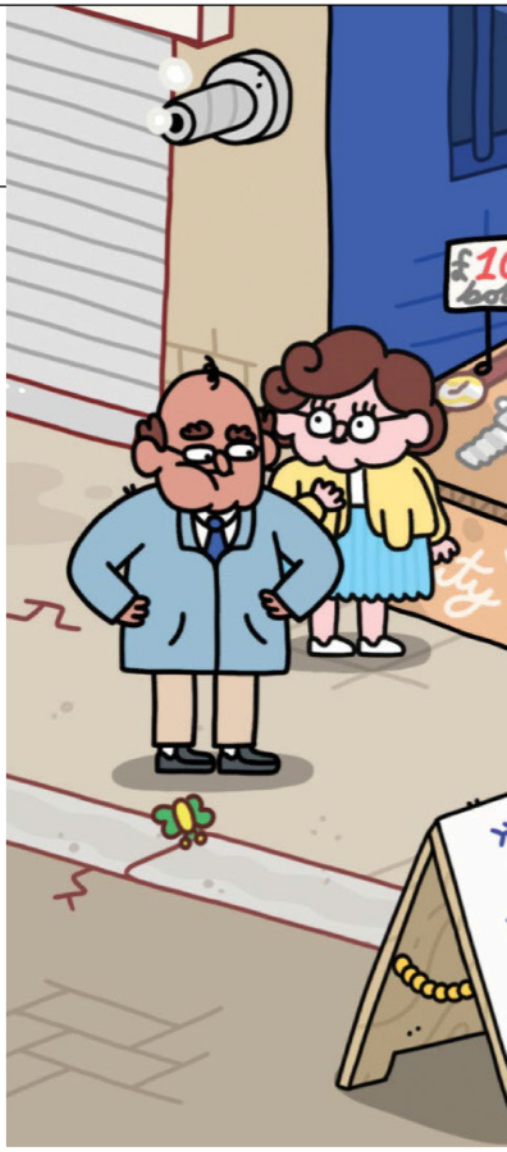
**ABOVE:** If your train has an artillery car, you can call in some very satisfying support.

**LEFT:** While used sparingly, live-action cutscenes really help define the game's atmosphere.

*Thank Goodness You're Here!*







**NEED TO KNOW**

| RELEASE | DEVELOPER | PUBLISHER | LINK |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2024 | Coal Supper | Panic | thankgoodness.game |

# THANK GOODNESS YOU'RE HERE!

## This Yorkshire-inspired indie has me chuffed by its potential

**Among the many new game trailers that premiered at Gamescom 2023, one indie developer instantly became the unlikely standout with the unveiling of *Thank Goodness You're Here!* Set in the bizarre northern England town of Barnsworth, you play as a travelling salesman who is given a series of increasingly odd jobs.**

Brought to life by best friends James Carbutt and Will Todd, who both originate from Barnsley, I got the chance to go hands-on with the "comedy slapformer", walking away with nothing but admiration for the peculiar humour that inhabits every street corner. Utilising only a walk, jump and punch command, the gameplay is a blend of exploring and interacting with the surroundings, all leading to some light puzzles.

I start the 20-minute demo stuck in a chimney. Pelted by a broom from an overly keen chimney sweep, our plucky protagonist falls into a living room that instantly recollects memories of visiting my grandparents' terraced house. Everything from the brick fireplace, to the clocks and photos on the mantelpiece, to the lone chair that dominates more of the room than it has any right to was present. Sat amid this is an elderly man who briefly lowers his newspaper to shake his head at the mess of soot that has coated the carpet, as I make a cartoon-style quick exit through the window.

Landing in a backyard that has seen better days, a bemused gardener asks for help getting water out of his garden hose to tend his tomatoes. "I've been sucking this pipe, and nothing," he admits. Quite a way with words, this chap.

This leads to a quick trip down a well where I'm greeted by a wiggly worm. How do I know it's a wiggly worm? Well, it announces itself as one, "Ooh look at me," it mutters in a soft creepy voice that's hard not to chuckle at. It becomes apparent that I need to punch the worm and the wall it's occupying to progress, so a small jump and a whack to the face and it's no more Mr Worm, as he lets out a comical yell.

These weird creatures and residents essentially make up *Thank Goodness You're Here!* Every character has something quirky about them. If it's not Big Ron and his big pies, it's Florence the meat counter girl who flirts with the sweaty meat delivery boy, or the takeaway food vendor who enjoys having his rear slapped, or Roger the veg merchant who has an enormous head shaped like a corn on the cob that has caused him trauma for decades. It's filled with more euphemisms than a Carry On movie.

**IT BECOMES APPARENT THAT I NEED TO PUNCH THE WORM AND THE WALL IT'S OCCUPYING**

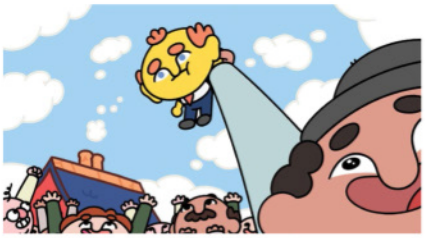
PLAYED IT

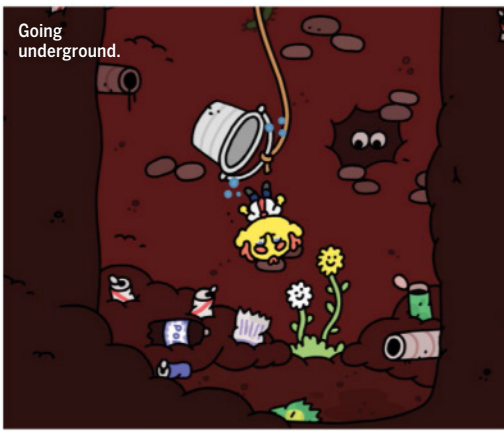
### GOLDEN GOOSE

It's easy to see why Panic – best known for publishing *Untitled Goose Game* – snapped up this project from developer Coal Supper: everything has its own wonderful zany style, not that distant from the Beano comics. It's the little things that tickled me most, such as a postman uttering how he "can't wait" to get home to his puzzles and the absurd sexual noises that pour out from characters if you hit them one too many times. This is a game that wants you to laugh.

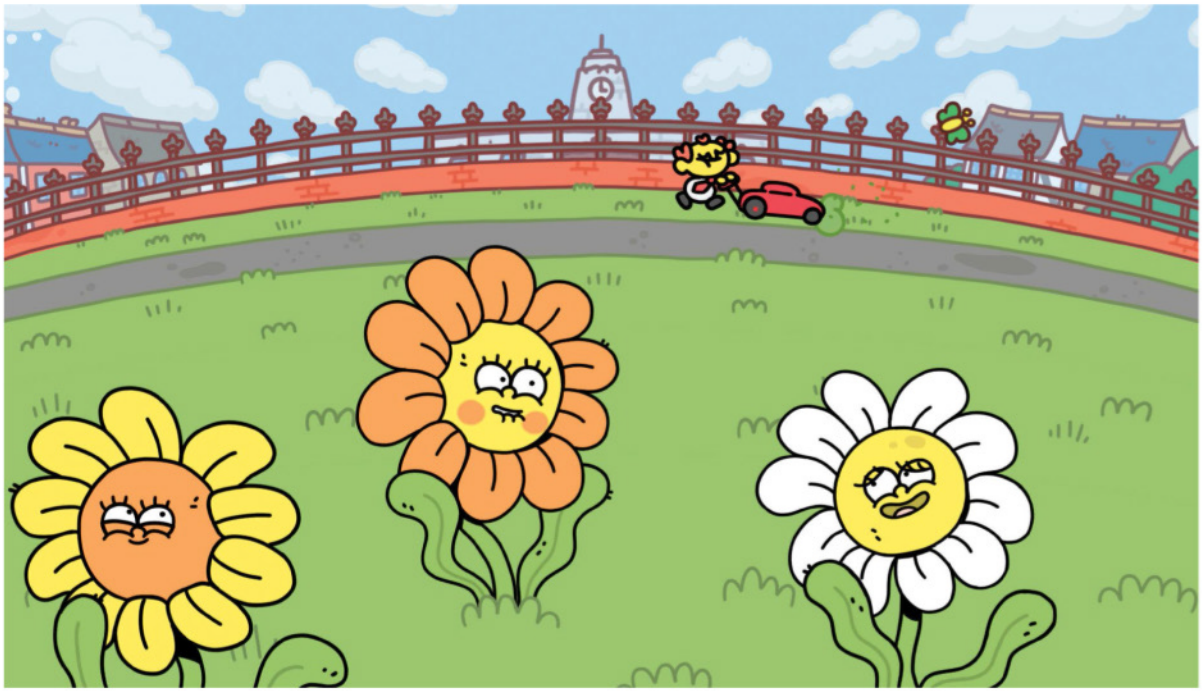
While the town of Barnsworth opens up gradually, with the town clock moving forward by an hour every time a task is completed, it's clear that *Thank Goodness You're Here!* won't be the longest of games – say six hours then into double figures with extras at a guess. Far from a negative, the British humour on show that mixes Wallace and Gromit with Rick and Morty is a delight, offering more than most modern blockbusters do in four times the length. This duo is on to something great and, by gum, I hope they stick the landing.

*Matt Poskitt*





Going underground.



**ABOVE:** *Thank Goodness You're Here!* is set in the bizarre Northern English town of Barnsworth.

**LEFT:** Flower power is getting out of hand.

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# JEDI REMASTERS

## NIGHTDIVE STUDIOS is uniting the past and present of PC gaming like no other developer

***By Robert Jones***

**In this landmark issue of PC Gamer magazine, we've naturally been reflecting on the history of PC gaming over the last 30 years, as well as where the industry is now.**

Three decades ago, when PC Gamer was in its early years, many landmark PC games were released, but two of the most impactful were *System Shock*, the groundbreaking immersive sim that proceeded to found an entire genre, as well as *Star Wars: Dark Forces*, a first-person shooter that set new benchmarks for narrative storytelling and technical wizardry in an FPS.

Today in 2023 one studio, now known for its Jedi-level remasters of classic PC games, is reuniting this part of PC gaming's past with its present like no other – Nightdive Studios, which this year has released a fantastically remade version of *System Shock* and, next year, is dropping a full remaster of *Star Wars: Dark Forces*.

Naturally, we thought there was no better studio to get together with to discus PC gaming's past and present. And, considering we were talking about the now mythical *System Shock*, we also got on the blower to development legends Warren Spector and Paul Neurath as well, inviting them to our roundtable chat too.

As such, PC Gamer presents a fascinating multi-faceted feature discussing both games, their impact on PC gaming and, crucially, what both are still bringing to the table for PC gamers today in their remade and remastered versions.

NIGHTDIVE STUDIOS

# Star Wars: Dark Forces Remastered

## PC Gamer sits down with the developers remastering the now iconic, game-changing 1990's first-person shooter

**To find out more about Nightdive Studio's incoming remaster of iconic first-person shooter *Star Wars: Dark Forces* three decades after the original's release, PC Gamer sat down to chat with three of the team's key members about their history with the game, as well as how it's been upgraded for the incoming remaster.**

### Did you feel any trepidation taking on the project of remastering such a famous and beloved FPS as *Star Wars: Dark Forces*?

**Larry Kuperman:** I wouldn't say trepidation but we approached this project with an appropriate level of respect for the work of art that we were going to be remastering. We understand how important the game is, and how many people were really influenced [by *Dark Forces*] – [and formed] their perception of what the Star Wars universe should be by playing it.

The game was originally released one year after id Software's *Doom*, and *Dark Forces* really pushed the envelope of what videogames could do in immersing players in the Star Wars universe.

**Stephen Kick:** And just for historical context, for me, personally, this was my very first PC game. I feel like I've completely come full circle here at Nightdive, getting to work on, essentially, the game that inspired me to do what I'm doing now.

### How do you think the original *Dark Forces* pushed the boundaries for FPS games?

**Max Waine:** Just for the level of technical aptitude that LucasArts had, it's very much on display. Compared to something like *Doom* or even a contemporary like *Hexen*, there's things on display that you couldn't really have seen prior in any first-person shooter of that type. You have fully stacked layouts. You have rooms on top of rooms. It's not something you could have done in *Doom*. You have 3D models actually moving around – like the mouse-droids driving around. You have the hologram for the Death Star on the first level. And, of course, on several levels, you have your ship flying in. It's all very technically impressive.

**SK:** From a narrative standpoint, too, I'd say it's probably one of, if not the first, FPS to have a story that goes throughout all the missions. They're all linked by characters and a plot, not just, "Go into this room. Kill everything here. Get a keycard. Go to the next level." They're very mission objective, and there's voice-acting. It feels like you're in your own Star Wars story.

**LK:** And that's exactly the point that I was going to make. Beyond the technical marvels that they achieved in making the game, the sum of that was that you really felt immersed in the game. I was playing it... Steve played a lot of these games with his father, and I played these games with my son. But this was something that really made you feel that you were part of a story that was familiar to you, but also that you were answering the question of, "What happens next?"

### Do you think it's this embedding of the narrative within the gameplay that allowed *Dark Forces* to capture the Star Wars-y feel so well?

**LK:** I absolutely think so, and I think, in general, we've been very vocal about the topic of videogames as art. I think what you just described in asking your question is really the quality we look for in good art. That you come away from it saying, "I don't know why, but this made me feel a certain way". And *Dark Forces* certainly did that.

**SK:** Just to go into more detail, the game even starts with the iconic title crawl and the John Williams score. And then the camera even pans down to, you know, the first planet that you go to with the Moldy Crow flying over. I think, for the first time since Return of the Jedi anyways, you're experiencing that magic all over again, but it's in this brand-new, interactive medium. It had a really powerful effective on a lot of people, myself included.

### What are your individual recollections of playing the original game back in the 1990s?

**LK:** I remember playing it with my

**MEET THE TEAM**
*Key members of Nightdive Studios' Dark Forces team*

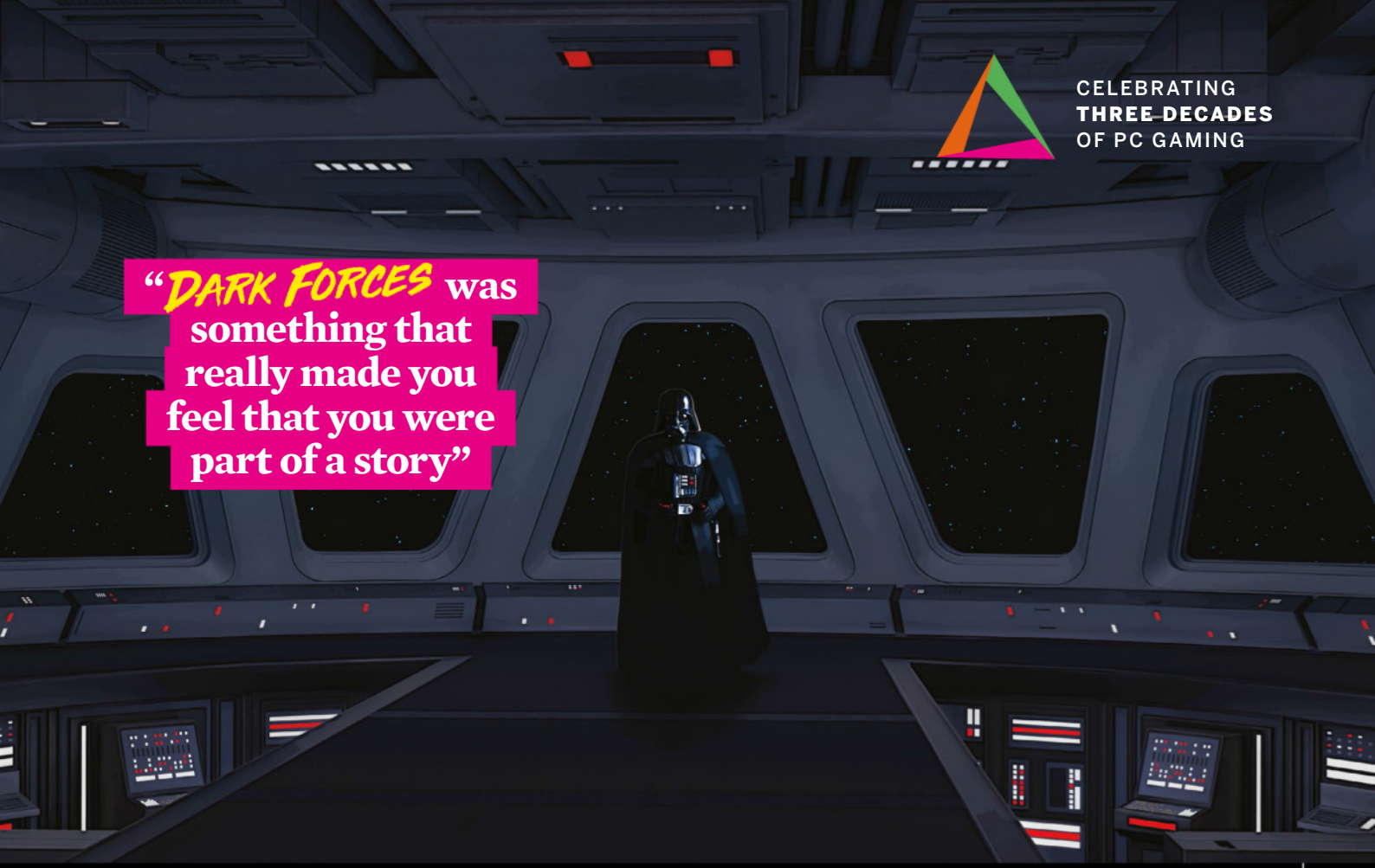
**STEPHEN KICK**
CEO and founder, Nightdive Studios

**LARRY KUPERMAN**
Director of business development, Nightdive Studios

**MAX WAINE**
Project lead and programmer, Nightdive Studios

'Kyle Katarn finds himself outnumbered 3 to 1 aboard the Imperial controlled fuel station, *Ergo*.'
1995-2023 ™ and © Lucasfilm Ltd.

**BELOW:** The *Star Wars: Dark Forces* remaster is due out next year. The original released back in 1995.



> "*Dark Forces* was something that really made you feel that you were part of a story"

son. My son was obviously quite young at the time. Seeing it through his eyes, the sense of being drawn into that entire universe, was fantastic. The fact that there was a connection between the game and a well-known movie series made it really, really special.

**SK:** For me, I distinctly remember going over to Computer City with my parents to buy our first PC. This was really special for me because, growing up, they never allowed me to have a console. I'm immediately going, "What games can we put on this thing? What does the PC gaming landscape look like?" I remember, we were at the store, and we were going to the checkout, and there was a shareware copy of *Doom* that I sneakily tried to put on the conveyer. It gets to the cashier's hands, and my mum's like, "What is this brightly red package with all this stark imagery on it?" So that went back. But they compromised, and picked up *Dark Forces*, because luckily that was right there. We went home, and my dad showed me how to enter in MS-DOS prompts for the very first time to get the game to run. And at that point, I'm like, "This is so lame. With the Nintendo, you just hit a button, and it turns on. I've got to type in code to play this game."

But then it starts up, and the rest is history. I'm instantly captivated. My whole life and direction, unbeknownst to me at the time, is changed. For the next couple of years, I'm just devouring any kind of news I could get about *Dark Forces* to *Jedi Knight*. I'm cutting up my PC Gamers, and I'm putting the ads up on the walls. I'm attending the midnight launch party to get my copy, and saving up my money for a 3D accelerator. This was the impetus behind, you know, everything I strived for, I think. A lot of really great memories because of *Dark Forces*.

**MW:** One of the things I think that particularly impressed was the technical aspect, in large part for me, that impressed me so much when I first played it. I have a strong grounding in playing a lot of the original *Doom*. So moving from that to *Dark Forces*, it really feels like a big leap up in terms of technology and story, and how that's delivered to the player.

**LK:** Let me just add to that. When I play *Dark Forces*, or when I watch my son play *Dark Forces*, I didn't have any of the background to understand how it was done. The end effect could have best been described as, "How did they do it? Magic". As I follow along with the developers working on *Dark Forces*, it turns out that my guess was correct, that it was done with magic.

It's amazing how much they were able to squeeze out of the limitations of what software and hardware at the time could do to achieve what they did. So hats off to the original developers.

**TOP:** Star Wars: Dark Forces Remaster will support up to 4K resolution at 120 fps.

**ABOVE:** Nightdive has totally remastered all of the game's cutscenes. You can opt for the originals if you want to, though.

### What was your vision for the new remastered version of *Dark Forces*?

**SK:** We're at this stage with Nightdive where it's the perfect opportunity for us to look at *Dark Forces*, and see what we can do to really bring it to that next level. All the right pieces have fallen in place. We've redone the cinematics completely from scratch, using as close to the original source material as we can. We've matched and moved all the shots so that it's imperceptible, almost, from the original vision and composition, but it's in higher resolution, and it just looks beautiful. The sprites have been redrawn and reanimated.

So it looks exactly how it did in 1994, but beautiful on a high-resolution monitor. That was kind of our approach here. We were going to take a decade of experience doing this, and we were going to focus it all

**"We had to use SOPHISTICATED modern techniques to get it to work nicely, while keeping the same basic idea"**

on this one title, and really do the best that we possibly could to ensure that *Dark Forces* would be remembered and appreciated for everything that it did, all over again.

**LK:** I was going to say: no pressure on Max!

**SK:** Following that, I just tell the guys, "Hey, this is the best game ever. Don't mess it up." Max is the one who has to do it.

**LK:** Seriously, the two things that I look for, in terms of what the finished product will be, are respect and evoking those same emotions that *Dark Forces* brought to us the first time. Those are our principal goals. There is often a temptation for people working on remasters to change things, to put their own imprint on it. And at Nightdive, we take a different approach. We always have respect for the material and being true to the source.

### How do you nail recreating those emotions?

**LK:** To start with, let me back up, and say that what's originally done with this game, and as a work of art, was magic. You really can't say, "It was this particular thing that made me feel that way". It's the sum of all those things. And that's why when people ask how we begin a project like this, and how Max and the team begin to work on it – step one is always to play the original game. It's to go through that, and to understand how important it was in the grand scheme of things. That's always step one. But if you look in the trailer that's out; if you look at Darth Vader, you can see exactly what we tried to do. The scenes are almost duplicative, but one is in much higher resolution.

**TOP:** *Dark Forces* is the debut of hero Kyle Katarn, who would go on to star in the *Jedi Knight* games.

**ABOVE:** Retaining the unique feel of the classic *Dark Forces* FPS gameplay is key for Nightdive Studios.

One thing we haven't touched on is that we've had absolutely great support from the teams at Disney and at Lucas. It's an interactive relationship. Particularly the folks at Lucas who have been really excellent at helping us stay on target.

### Can you talk about the importance of Kyle Katarn, *Dark Forces*' hero?

**SK:** You know, as a young kid in the '90s, and getting to experience a game like this in the Star Wars universe, not only with kind of a fresh take on the series as a whole, but you're being put in the footsteps of Kyle Katarn, who is, quickly at the beginning of the game, labelled as kind of an Imperial defector. He's not really a nobody; he's a mercenary who's been disenfranchised with the Imperials. He's willing to do some dirty jobs for the Rebels, just to get back at them.

And his first job is to steal the Death Star plans. So I think that Lucas did an amazing job of integrating the beginning of the game with the original franchise. But, really, that's kind of the only connection it has. After that, it leads you into your own unique story outside of the Skywalker saga. His character, it grows and it builds just like it would in any movie – or any well-made movie, I should say – until you're the hero of the rebellion by the end of it.

What really makes it strong is that, in the sequel, they really push that to an amazing degree by having, you know, live-action actors and full-motion video, and another whole, new cast of characters. It really expanded on the Star Wars universe in a way that had never been done before. I think that he just resonates so strongly with the people that play the game, because he's a hero of the franchise, but, you know, he's never been in a movie. It's unique in that way.

### What's been the biggest technical challenge in remastering this game?

**MW:** It's been quite an interesting game from a technical standpoint.

One thing I've realised is that there's a Goldilocks zone for where you can program a game. *Dark Forces* has been difficult to change, from the technical end of things, because it is very heavily over-designed. It's very well-programmed, but it's also a lot to take in, initially.

Our primary programmer, Samuel Villareal, did an absolutely fantastic job of doing the initial porting from DOS. But there were a lot of small details in how LucasArts did things at the time that made stuff particularly difficult. LucasArts did some very interesting technological things, especially for the time. Effectively, they managed to do multi-threading effectively, using a task system in the mid-1990s.

We had to use sophisticated, modern techniques to be able to get it to work nicely, while keeping the same basic idea. Because one thing about *Dark Forces* that is nice is that, unlike other projects, we managed to get the source code from the start. So we could use that as a basis, but we had to modernise all of these concepts that worked for programming in DOS for your 486 or Pentium, but do not fly on your 16-core, infinite gigahertz, modern processor.

**SK:** Max, was there a specific challenge related to the game design that had to be translated for Kex [the remaster's game engine]?

**Max Waine:** I think the biggest challenge that we faced was, as I said, how they did the multithreading stuff, and updating that to work with the new system. I'd say the other thing that's been difficult to appropriately modernise is the user interface that they had, in terms of menus and such, because the menus are all mouse-driven in the original. And the briefings are, as well. So finding an appropriate balance that feels faithful to how the original menus are, while being able to work while you're on a controller, was quite difficult. Outside of that, the core game design we haven't touched at all. In terms of how the game design plays, that's perfectly fine, outside of them just being very over-engineered.

### How influential do you feel the original *Dark Forces* was on FPS games and broader PC gaming?

**MW:** I want to reiterate that they really raised the bar in quite a few areas, just when it came to the technology, when it came to the delivery of story and immersing yourself within the world of Star Wars. And I think that is kind of the key words I would use when it comes to what sets *Dark Forces* so thoroughly apart from its contemporaries. It's "immersive". Sorry, Larry.

**SK:** Just one aspect that I remember from back then that really impressed me was that every level was unique, and has its own texture palette and kind of aesthetic. You'd travel to so many different locations that nothing ever feels the same. In one, you're navigating a sewer system that's been secured by droids and swamp creatures. And on the other, you're on a frozen ice planet, breaking into an Imperial detention centre. And the whole thing kind of crescendos on board an elite Star Destroyer. Just that sense of scale, I think, of all the different levels, really amplified the Star Wars feel of it. It did such a great job of emulating the feel of the movies in that regard.

**LK:** What I want to say, just to build on what Max said, if you remember, *Doom* comes out, and changes everything. It changes all our perceptions of what an FPS can be. And then there's kind of the generation of what was called – and I don't mean to say it dismissively – the *Doom* clones.

Well, none of those games believed in letting the story get in the way of shooting things. Right? This was the first game that I remember playing where the story was not something to be dismissed. The game was the story, and the story was the game. *Dark Forces* was one of those games that raised the bar for everything that came after.

### What's the thing in the remaster that you get a kick out of the most?

**SK:** I particularly love that you can play the game in a true 3D mode now. There's a full mouse-look, and the 3D environments behave in the way that you'd expect them to. So it feels very modern, but you're still exploring the original geometry of the original level design, and all the atmosphere is intact. But it feels like a modern shooter now. That, coupled with the increased resolution of the sprites, and the clarity of the sound. It feels brand-new while also being familiar, and kind of cosy. It's like reuniting with an old friend again.

**MW:** I'm project lead on a Star Wars project! I'm in my mid-20s. You can't tell little kid Max that. And holy crap, he wouldn't believe you. That's absolutely wild to me, that I've had the privilege to be able to do this, and I'm so glad that I've been able to, and I'm so proud of the amazing work that everyone's been doing.

**LK:** So I need to reveal that I play all of our games but I'm terrible at games. I've not gotten any better as I've aged. That said, my favourite, I'm in just awe of the cutscenes. They bring back the same feeling now that I had back then. ■

**BELOW:** Kyle, mate, being totally honest with you, I don't think you've got this.

NIGHTDIVE STUDIOS

# System Shock

## PC Gamer hosts a star-studded industry roundtable to discuss the seminal sci-fi series' impact on PC gaming

**Warren Spector and Paul Neurath, who were key members of the original *System Shock* team, sit down with Larry Kuperman and Stephen Kick of Nightdive Studios, key parts of the *System Shock* remake, to discuss the groundbreaking sci-fi immersive sim series.**

### What is your history in the gaming industry and *System Shock* as a series?

**Warren Spector:** I started in tabletop games, and moved onto computer games, and then console videogames. [Regarding *System Shock*], I was working on a title I called *Alien Commander*, which I wanted to make as an internal project, and head up both creatively and in production. But Doug Church [*System Shock* lead programmer] was hanging out in my office one day, and we were both talking about how sick we were of fantasy games, and dungeons, and rescuing princesses, and heroes that were built like the Mighty Thor. He and Paul were working – I didn't know – on another similar project. They were sick of that as well, as I understand it. Doug came to me with an idea that ultimately became *System Shock*. I just sort of sat there with my pitiful, little, two-page *Alien Commander* proposal, with art I had done, which you never want to see.

I listened to what he had to say, and went, "Yeah, that's better". And so *System Shock* was born. I produced it. We could talk more about my specific role, but I represented it at Origin, and kept it many times from getting killed. I think that was my major contribution to the game.

**Paul Neurath:** Yeah. Blue Sky [later Looking Glass] got underway in 1990 with, really, the goal to create this kind of new genre of immersive games, where we try to pull the player as much as we could into feeling like they really were in that world, and that they really were themselves making the decisions.

We tried to do this genre mashup. It also had this mix of roleplaying and combat and real-time gameplay – but, in this game, all in the first-person perspective to create that deep immersion. We had to create some new algorithms and some new technology with the texture mapping. We wanted to do something science-fiction, and that was really the genesis of *System Shock*. We wanted to take what he had learned from making games that had the immersive kind of gameplay, but to do it in the science-fiction genre.

We revamped the engine heavily for *System Shock*. We wanted to go full 3D. I'm not just including the rendering technology, but some of the traversal gameplay mechanics. And we wanted to push the genre forward. We really wanted to go for a fully ground-up, in-engine, indie kind of user interface and gameplay.

In a lot of ways, *System Shock*, which came out in 1994, was the first full, you know, immersive sim, as we came to call it. So I'm very proud of that game. It was kind of a crazy game. We threw so much into that game. It was kind of insane that it would create a risk, and that we took that risk. But it worked.

**WS:** Just to add to that, the kind of 6D version of 3D was something new. I mean, you could turn your head in a direction that you weren't actually going. You could look around corners. You could crouch. You could lean. You could do all sorts of things that no one had been able to do. We could create sloped surfaces. We could create enormous chasms that, you know, you could look down, and see hundreds and hundreds of feet below you, which was kind of scary.

The other thing – to support what Paul said – that team was nuts in the best possible way. I remember, every once in a while something would show up in the game that they hadn't talked about. Maybe they talked to you, Paul. I don't know. They didn't talk to me.

I remember when we were this close to being done. I mean, like, being in beta. And I was in QA, at two in the morning, with Harvey Smith, who was a tester and is now running Arkane Studios. He showed me the game right before we went beta. There was a moving starfield. That doesn't sound like much, but you don't add features right before you go beta. It just isn't done.

I was furious. I mean, I was really angry. I went back to my office, and

**MEET THE DEVS**
*Two industry legends chat* System Shock *with PCG*

**WARREN SPECTOR**
Chief creative officer, OtherSide Entertainment

**PAUL NEURATH**
Founder and CEO, OtherSide Entertainment

**BELOW:** SHODAN's personality and relationship to her 'children' is a key part of *System Shock*.

**"With *System Shock* we wanted to go for a fully ground-up, in-engine, indie kind of user interface and gameplay"**

**"After releasing the game,because we stuck so closely to the original mechanics, we found a lot of people PRAISING US"**

did my little happy dance, because that was how committed the team was to making something of the highest possible quality. That team, they did crazy things, both planned and unplanned. But they would not compromise. And that was one of the big strengths of the team. They were going to change things. They were going to do what they wanted to do, and they were going to do what they believed in. It was a very special team. And I think that specialness – and, if can say it, influence – is still apparent in the game, even today, 30 years later.

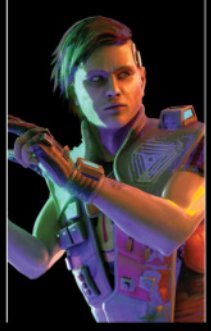
**PN:** It's a testament to what was accomplished with that game that it's still relevant three decades later, and the game still holds up. It's awesome that Nightdive was able to really bring it up, and bring it back in a way that modern gamers can appreciate.

### What about you Stephen?

**Stephen Kick:** PC games were always a really big part of my life. So in 2007, I went to school at one of the very first colleges that could give you a degree in game design. I basically went there to learn how to design games, and came out as a character artist on the other side. And I worked at Sony for a number of years before getting completely burned out by a large corporation, and being more or less a gear in the production cycle. I quit, and decided to do some more travelling. I packed everything up into my Honda Civic, and drove

**TOP:** That guy just admitted he was a console gamer.

**ABOVE:** Navigating a space station while battling rogue AI has never looked better.



across the border into Tijuana. So, for ten months, I travelled through all of Mexico, and all of central America, from Belize to Guatemala to the Panama Canal. I had brought with me a laptop – a small netbook – just to run a few of the classic games that had inspired me initially to work in the industry. It was games like *Grim Fandango*, *Full Throttle*, *System Shock II* and *The Curse of Monkey Island* that I think were the ones that I ended up playing.

It was one night in Guatemala, a particularly stormy night, that, for whatever reason, I needed to play *System Shock II*. The atmosphere was perfect. There was electricity in the air. I went to go play it, and it wouldn't run on the modern system. So I went to GOG.com. I just assumed that one of the greatest games of all time would be there, and it wasn't. It was the most requested game on their site, and that kind of led me down a rabbit hole to figure out what had happened to Looking Glass and Origin and Paul and Warren during that timeframe.

It led me to a discussion with Star Insurance Company [who] had the rights to the game. I suggested, "Why don't we just put the games back out there for people to enjoy again in the state that they are, without any updates, but just being able to run them?" That was kind of what started Nightdive Studios.

A number of years later, we got to a point where we had a team big enough to run a Kickstarter, and start development on a *System Shock* remake. Eight years later, it finally came out. But, yeah, that's more or less kind of how I got involved with *System Shock*, and got to know these fine gentlemen here.

**Larry Kuperman:** I will say this, Warren, after listening to what you said, I think there's something about the *System Shock* game itself that all the teams that work on that are crazy. Which is why this one-year project that we embarked on took us seven and a half years to complete.

You know, when we began the project, and throughout the course of the project, if we had a single driving directive for our team, it was to be true to the IP. The reason that we were doing this was because Paul and Warren and Doug Church and all the people that were involved in *System Shock* and the original creation had done something really special and really meaningful, and it

deserved to be preserved – with a new coat of paint on it, with a refreshed user interface, with new graphics. And we now allow players to use – what do you call those things? – oh, yeah, a mouse! We wanted to be true to the original game, and that was what our driving concept was.

### How has the *System Shock* series influenced the industry?

**SK:** One of the big surprises that we found after releasing the game was that, you know, because we stuck so closely to the original mechanics, and just the formula, we found a lot of people praising us for not holding their hands; for not including waypoints and a mission point and objective markers and stuff like that. The surprise was: we originally thought that we were going to get grilled on that pretty hard, because it's become such a standard and staple in games these days.

The most surprising thing for us was that people described it as an atrophied part of their brain starting to wake up again as a result of playing *System Shock*, because it actually trusted them, and it respected them. And it made them think again, while playing the game. As much as I would like to take credit for that – you know, it's a direct translation of what's in the original.

**WS:** I can tell you why I think it's influential, and why people still play it. There were many firsts in the game. And again, it's all down to that great team. But the way the game used physics was something new. If you took a shot with a weapon, the recoil was driven by physics. If you took a hit from an enemy, the head movement was driven by physics. If you started running, your head movement, and where you were looking, would be driven by physics. If you threw a grenade, its trajectory was... I mean, I could go on and on and on. But the use of physics was very sophisticated for its time, and I think it's still relevant today – and, frankly, underused. Because if I ever see boxes stacked again, I'll scream.

And in addition, I don't think it's an overstatement to say that *System Shock* introduced the idea of environmental storytelling to the world. The idea of killing everybody, and telling the story through video logs and emails, and then having the players piece the story together, and then see elements of the story in the world, and hear about, "We're about to go take the engine room!" And then you get to the door of the engine room, and there's blood on the walls, and dead bodies in front. And you open the door, and there are the bad guys. "This is where the attack on the engine room happened!"

That is still relevant today. Certainly the idea of having multiple player-driven ways to solve problems is still relevant too. If you had to get through a locked door, you could open it from cyberspace, or you could rip the panel off the wall, and rewire it using a little wiring minigame. Or you could find another route into the room on the other side of the door.

**PN:** And to Stephen's point, one reason we didn't have waypoints in *System Shock* is because, often, you didn't have a clear path. There were different ways you could go through. Creating a waypoint would artificially tell a player, "No, no, no. We want you to take this particular path," where that wasn't the best path or the path that would matter to a player, depending on their play style.

So I think that's an interesting example where we did something that wasn't particularly standard, and today it certainly is pretty non-standard. It's not the way a lot of games continue today to do it. And I don't know if you look at that as a good thing or a bad thing. But I'm proud that the team took that approach, even if that's not the standard way to do it these days.

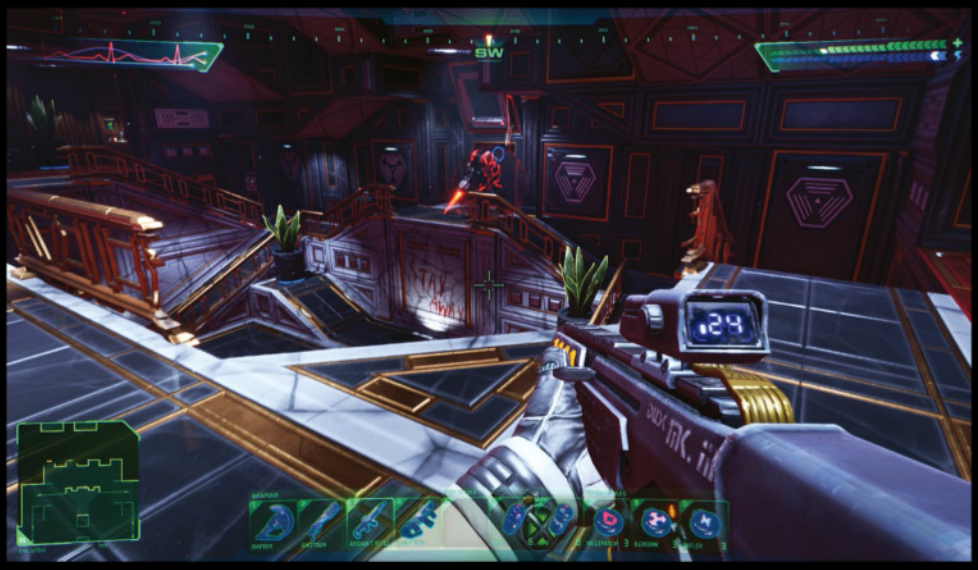
**WS:** That's kind of the key to the immersive sim genre. It's not about telling players how to solve problems. Typically, we tell the player what to do. Like, if SHODAN is about to laser the major cities on Earth and you have to stop her, that's telling the player what to do. But then how to do it is in the player's hands, and the order in which things happen is in the player's hands.

**LK:** Just to build on that, Warren, those were elements that we were very careful to try to preserve in the game. We got those things, and we understood the importance of that.

**PN:** One of the things about the original *System Shock* which I think has influenced other games in the years following – it was a horror game, obviously, in some ways. It was a scary game. It was the kind of game that we had players saying that they couldn't play at night-time. So we did our job in scaring people.

**LK:** I'll also say that with the remake, I was really glad that *Dark Souls* came out before us. That was not the original plan. We were supposed to have shipped our game years before. But *Dark Souls* came out before us. I remember breathing a sigh of relief, and saying, "Well, OK. It's OK to make games that are hard."

**WS:** That's true of immersive sims in general, I think, to some extent. You know, certainly there's an influence of *System Shock* on, you know, *System Shock II* and *Thief*, and *Deus Ex*, and *Dishonored* and Prey, and *BioShock*. You can see the lineage. ■



**BELOW:** Hacking is all well and good, but never underestimate the power of a great big gun to get the job done.

CELEBRATING
THREE DECADES
OF PC GAMING
WE CELEBRATE THE PEOPLE WHO MADE PC GAMER MAGAZINE THE CULTURAL TOUCHSTONE IT IS TODAY

**s I am sure many other PC gamers have done, I've grown old with PC Gamer magazine. Reading this magazine as a teenager in the mid-1990s was a formative experience for me, opening my eyes in the pre-internet days to the large industry and community that had grown around PC gaming's earliest years and was now flourishing vibrantly all over the world.**

Reading PC Gamer was the highlight of the month, the time when I'd get to hear from the gaming journalists I'd come to know well about the latest PC games. And, what's more, I got to play new PC games each month, too, with PC Gamer magazine coming with disc covermounts. I got to experience the new each month, and it was fantastic.

But PC Gamer magazine was so much more than just the games. It was the opinion, the culture, the regularly brilliant jokes, the events and competitions, the often mad photoshoots and illustrations for The Spy, the developer interviews, the hardware deepdives and tutorials... these all contributed to making PC Gamer magazine the monthly tour de force that represented everyone involved in PC gaming so well. It is the high benchmark we still aim to hit today in 2023 when making the magazine each month.

As such, on PC Gamer magazine's 30th anniversary, I feel it fitting that we celebrate many of the key people who made PC Gamer magazine over the past 30 years. The legends who made the best damn gaming magazine in the world.

BY

**ROBERT JONES**

*PC Gamer editor*

# "Terry Pratchett seemed keen to scoff the mashed potato from my plate"

## PC Gamer launch editor MATT BIELBY on creating the world's best games magazine

**MATT BIELBY**
*Former editor*

**TENURE**
1993 - 1994

**CURRENTLY**
Freelance writer and editor

**FAVOURITE GAMES**
*Lemmings, SimCity 2000, Doom*

### In the beginning...

I was deputy editor of Your Sinclair at Dennis Publishing, which Future bought in 1990, and where I arrived as its freshly promoted editor. That success allowed me to launch further games mags for Future, like Amiga Power, and Super Play for the Super Nintendo game console. With those both hits, and PCs and PC gaming rapidly gaining traction in the market, 1993 saw me offered a new title. It would become, of course, PC Gamer.

### The idea

The original brief, as it came to me, was pretty short, "PC games are the future, so do us a mag about PC games." At the time, I always liked each magazine to have a 'hook' – and with PC Gamer the hook was "serious, heavy-weight, American". So instead of bright colours, the dominant colour-scheme would be red, white, black – plus the shades of grey and brown of so many of the games themselves. The fonts used would be more classical. Even the size would be more American: instead of the wide super-A4 format of most contemporary games magazines, we reverted to the narrower old-school A4 to most closely approximate the smaller format of most American magazines.

### The execution

There was definitely a pilot issue, or issue zero. It was – as was traditional at the time – a single 24- or 32-page section repeated numerous times, with most (or all) of it genuine material rather than fake copy, as much as possible to be reused in the genuine issue 1. I remember we used a photo of Terry Pratchett on the front, and my first meeting with him – when he came down to Bath for the photoshoot – was over lunch, where he seemed keen to scoff the mashed potato from my plate as well as his.

Perhaps 15 years after the launch of PC Gamer, an academic from one of the big US universities – let's say Yale or Harvard – got in touch with me, wanting to see if he could buy a rare issue zero of PC Gamer. I think we only printed 30 or so. I said I probably have one, and I probably still do, but I'd no idea where it was – perhaps in one of many boxes full of old magazines in the loft.

Increasingly desperate, he started offering me money for it: $200, $600, $1,000, $1,500... But I was busy on a new project, and simply couldn't put in the effort needed to hunt for it. I never did learn just how high he would have gone...

### The gaming industry

The game industry by that point was bigger and more professional than it had been, but still friendly and fun: I knew all the UK-based marketing and PR people, and many of the developers and CEO types at that time, plus a smattering from abroad. But with PC Gamer there definitely started to be more 'remember-the-time-difference' phone calls than before – no real internet still, remember – and more of a corporate feel creeping in.

### Standout moments

We had a great team on the early PC Gamers, including deputy editor Gary Whitta [later to become editor, then editor of the US version, and latterly a screen writer of some repute] and art editor Maryanne Booth, and – in a brand-new office, with views over two pub gardens – the team developed quite a family feel; dysfunctional at times, perhaps, but still a family. Aiding this, an office pet: Winnie the hamster, white of fur and adventurous of disposition, who lived in a cage on one of our desks and toured all the games magazines in her transparent plastic exercise ball, occasionally bouncing down the steps at the end if we didn't catch her in time.

### The most interesting person

In terms of articulate people in the game industry, full of ideas and enthusiasm and always a great interview, Peter Molyneux stands out. I heard, some time back, that he doesn't speak to the press any more, which seems a shame, if true; he was very good at it. Dave Perry of *Earthworm Jim* fame was good too, as was David Jones of *Lemmings*. Oh, and Sid Meier – though it was just his style of strategy game that had first intimidated me at the launch of PC Gamer.

### PC Gamer's legacy

Any magazine that lasts 30 years is a remarkable one, and I love PC Gamer, though my time on it was brief – just a couple of issues editing the UK one, then six months or so in America, getting the US version going. I'm very proud of it, all told – it was always well-written, inspiring, inventive and – crucially – on the reader's side. ■

# "I'm grateful for every minute, and wouldn't change a thing."

## Former editor GARY WHITTA on meeting gaming gods

### In the beginning...

Back in 1993 I was working at one of Future's rival companies on magazines like ACE and CVG. My friend and colleague Jim Douglas left that company to go work for Future and shortly after called me to see if I'd be interested in joining him there and working on a new magazine launch. So I took the leap of faith, and after I arrived in Bath I was told I was to be deputy editor of a new PC gaming magazine. Matt Bielby, one of Future's top editors who had launched many of their titles, moved on after the first two issues to start work on another launch title and I was promoted to editor.

### Standout moments

I have fond memories of playing *Doom* over LAN cable in the office with a cardboard partition erected between the two gaming stations so that neither player could see where the other one was on the map. I remember competing pretty fiercely with PC Zone, our main rival, for exclusive first reviews and cover stories.

### Your favourite piece

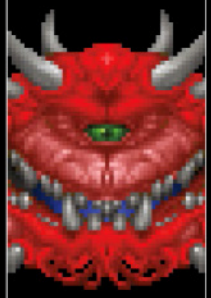
Probably the Game Gods photoshoot we did, which was inspired by Vanity Fair's Hollywood issue. Back then the idea of game designers/programmers as celebrities was still a pretty foreign idea, certainly nothing like celebrity culture in Hollywood, but I wanted to give it a shot. In the end we were able to assemble an incredible array of talent, including Gabe Newell and Jordan Mechner and Roberta Williams and Tim Schafer and Peter Molyneux and Richard Garriott – the list goes on – for two remarkable photoshoots, one held in San Francisco and the other in Texas. We couldn't get everyone in one place at the same time, so we did it as two separate shoots and comped it all together to make it look like one big group. I'm really proud of having pulled that together.

**GARY WHITTA**
*Former editor*

**TENURE**
1993 - 1995
then 1996 - 2000

**CURRENTLY**
Screenwriter and author

**FAVOURITE GAMES**
*Half-Life, Portal, The Sims, C&C: Red Alert, Quake II*



**TOP LEFT:** Gary's iconic 'Game Gods' PC Gamer cover.

**BELOW:** That's *a lot* of game-making talent.

### The most interesting person

Tim Schafer has to be up there, I remember as a young journalist on the UK mag travelling out to California to interview him when he was working on *Full Throttle* and thinking, 'this guy is a genius'. And of course I was right. And I'll always have a special place in my heart for Peter Molyneux. He's taken a lot of shit over the years, but I truly believe he's also a genius whose only flaw was to sometimes have ambitions greater than he could realise. And I don't even know if I consider that a flaw. Peter is a very warm and funny person, I never had a conversation with him where he didn't crack me up.

### PC Gamer's legacy

I'm really proud of what we achieved at PC Gamer, in both the UK and the US editions. We made a consistently really good magazine. And I consider myself lucky to have been in that particular job at that particular time, to have been at the centre of one of the most exciting periods in the history of games. I will always, always remember it with fondness. I'm grateful for every minute, and wouldn't change a thing. ■

# "I just wish I could tell the Romero story"

## JIM FLYNN on editing PCG through the golden age of PC gaming

**JIM FLYNN**
*Former editor*

**TENURE**
1995 - 1999

**CURRENTLY**
Director - Citrus Media

**FAVOURITE GAMES**
*World of Warcraft, Civ II, Quake, Command & Conquer*

### In the beginning...

I read mining geology at university but always found gaming the perfect foil to actually studying. I was a big fan of Edge magazine – a legend of the time – and they had an advert for a writer. They had a few hundred applicants but I got the job because the other finalist didn't like tea and I guess they needed a chaiwala. Always say you like tea. I bought issue one of PC Gamer at my local newsagent and thought it could be improved. When the PC Gamer deputy editor position came up I left Edge after 18 amazing months. It's hugely disappointing we lost Edge editor Jason Brookes. RIP mate, I miss you.

### Life on the mag

It was a golden age of gaming and especially PC gaming. *Doom* introduced the world to proper 3D games – and *Wolf* as well. 3dfx's Voodoo card was incredible and launched us into a new era – it was ahead of its time but changed everything. Windows 95, the nascent internet, multiplayer LAN play at work. Modems were awful but a reality for most.

### Standout moments

Working through the general election night on deadline in 1997 and interviewing Peter Molyneaux at 2am just after he had sold Bullfrog to EA. Backdooring it from a party in London after my review of *Z* wasn't so well received... Turning down first class tickets to LA with a lovely girl because I was too busy working. That was a mistake. Receiving multiple horse's hearts, entrails and photos of the PC Gamer team walking around town in the post in response to a *Syndicate* competition. "Threaten us!" we said – and the readers did well. Playing *Quake* with id Software in Texas with all our real faces mapped onto the characters – a feature that got removed for obvious reasons. The travel, parties, the mates... you had to be there really. And lastly resigning knowing full-well that editing PC Gamer would be the best job I would ever have.

### Favourite piece

My personal two favourites? Videogame addiction written by John Smith and a psychology professor, illustrated by a heroin needle and about 30 years ahead of its time. Maybe the other was an article on magazine advertising and whether it works I told my bosses in the pub just before Christmas that I was planning on writing it and they just laughed and said, "OK". They were somewhat less amused when it landed on their desks a few weeks later. Fortunately I was in Mexico so Ferg, the ad sales rep, couldn't reach me. We didn't lose a single advert because of it though.

### Favourite cover

The *Quake II* world exclusive review et al. Less is more. Life is good.

### The gaming industry

I'm going to sound grumpy but I'm not. I love life and I love games. It feels derivative, unexciting and afflicted by a bad dose of sequelitis to me. PR and YouTube hype-managed, endless talk, focus on plot and promises, too many words written because you can waffle on the web, too many minutes analysing and too many loot boxes. So many aching yawn-fests that are the cross-hair, corridor-peeking *CoD*, and *Valorant* with $80 cosmetic plastic knives. I'm delighted they are successful but I'd rather watch *Quake* Done Quickest than stand still in a game waiting for someone to peer round a corner before I take a shot.

### The most interesting person

Having a couple of lunches with Sid Meier and his son. Dinners in Vegas with Louis Castle [Westwood, *Command & Conquer* etc]. Peter Molyneux was always great company. Getting smashed with Jimmy White while playing pool and chilling for an evening – awesome guy. Chowing down on andouillette in a top French bistro with Bruno Bonnell [Infogrames] in Lyon. Spending a few days with id Software, John Carmack and Paul Steed... I just wish I could tell the Romero story. The Trip Hawkins backyard lobster BBQ. Meeting Miyamoto-san. Kate Seekings (get in touch).

### PC Gamer's legacy

The gaming industry trade paper always referred to PC Gamer's review scores as "notoriously harsh," which I thought was unfair. Games were and are expensive, and in the long-term readers' trust is more valuable then advertiser support. I was once offered £10,000 in a briefcase to give a game 90% – it got 80%. We tried to tell it how it was and with only a few exceptions I believe we got it right. ■

# "There – staring me in the face – was the disembodied head of Perky Pig"

## Former editor MARK DONALD on PC Gamer magazine competitions getting too real

### In the beginning...

Joining PC Gamer as a writer in the '90s was a lucky break that really lived up to its 'dream job' billing. Future Publishing was an incredibly exciting place back then. The offices were like a chaotic dorm: full of ambitious young people doing daft things, playing, partying, staying up all night, missing deadlines and pursuing world domination.

The place was stuffed to the rafters with gaming equipment, leftover pizza and booze, plus the booming music, bantz, and temper tantrums of harried mag teams working like a stupidly overclocked PC to make it to the printer on time. The mag was held together by the creativity, humour, spirit, and sheer likeability of the people who helped get you through another deadline while working into the wee hours.

### Your standout moments

Well, there was the time we were subjected to a campaign of surveillance and intimidation from a lunatic stalker dear reader. Editor Jonathan Davies had invited the readership to make us, "An offer we couldn't refuse," for a dream PC as part of a *Syndicate Wars* competition. There were lots of 'colourful' efforts that entered into the spirit of Jonathan's challenge. But then we started receiving packages from an anonymous figure calling himself Ctrl-Alt-Deleter.

First, there was a recorded message in a voice like Jigsaw's. It threatened all kinds of evil unless he won the PC. The tape's fear factor was augmented – in true serial killer style – by the sound of chilling piano music and children playing innocently in the background. How we laughed. Next came squishy body parts – hearts and kidneys mostly. I said they must be pig organs. Sourced from the local butcher. Probably. How we laughed. Nervously.

Shortly after, we received photos. It was us! The PCG team. Snapped going merrily about our business in town.

**MARK DONALD**
*Former editor*

**TENURE**
1996 - 1999
then 2003 - 2006

**CURRENTLY**
Retired

**FAVOURITE GAMES**
*Half-Life, Half-Life 2, Warcraft II, Quake, Total Annihilation*

**TOP RIGHT:** The now legendary PC Gamer *Half-Life* cover.

**BELOW:** Imagine being the first person in the world to review *Half-Life*!

Hmm, they looked a little too close-up for comfort. How we laughed. But the sound kinda died in our throats. Ctrl-Alt-Deleter's campaign climaxed when we received a hat-sized box by special delivery. The serial killer flick, Se7en, was still fresh in our minds and, well, this move reeked of that film's famous final scene.

The box sat in the middle of the office and everyone just stared at it. Editor Jonathan took full responsibility for the situation – he ordered his office junior to open the box. That meant me. I sliced the box and out spewed packing material. I remember a couple of people peeking from behind their monitors and desks. I scooped out polystyrene chips and sprang back in horror...

There - staring me in the face – was the disembodied head of Perky Pig. Fresh. Eyeballs intact. Faint look of surprise on his pink face. Christ. Needless to say, Jonathan immediately sent the PC to Ctrl-Alt-Deleter's dead-drop address. He was a worthy winner. My worst nightmare was that he'd get back in touch with one of his anonymous notes made from old newspaper saying, "What competition?" Thankfully we never heard from him again. Or did we...?

### The evolution

The biggest innovation was the Extra Life section. It was a gamble because we were devoting a serious amount of precious space to PC gaming culture – diverting pages from mainstream games, which just wasn't done back then. The idea was to cover the crazy creativity of the PC gaming community in all its glory. We wanted to report on cyberspace with the same level of respect accorded to real world events. Nobody had done anything like this before but we knew it was a success when our arch-rivals at PC Zone copied the section a few months later.

### Your favourite piece

From a personal perspective, I loved being the first person in the world to review the original *Half-Life* thanks to cloak and dagger work to secure the exclusive by my editor, Jim Flynn. I actually gave *Half-Life* a 97% score which would have been the highest mark PC Gamer had ever awarded at the time. Jim knocked it back to 96% because he thought I'd got carried away. I still think I'm right!

### The most interesting person

I met Gabe Newell before anyone had heard of Valve or *Half-Life*. They'd just moved into an office in Seattle. All their energies were being poured into the game. Newell was extremely impressive on a personal level and his team were bright and enthusiastic. As the day wore on it became clear they were redefining the first-person-shooter as we knew it. I later heard I was the first journalist to see *Half-Life*. Valve hadn't had much feedback up to that point but my reaction confirmed to them that they were onto something big. I hear they've gone on to do quite well since then. ■

# "Death to Edge! Death to the eternal enemy!"

## Former writer KIERON GILLEN on pirate crews and messy adventures

### In the beginning...

When I left university in 1998 I applied for the PC Gamer staff writer position, turned up in a green suit and a metal T-shirt, and they offered me it. That I had only actually owned a PC for a few months led to an intensive period of catching up and bluff. That period never really ended.

### The gaming industry

On the magazine side, you would not believe the real rivalry, backstabbing and aggressive competition between the PC games magazines. It was genuinely inspiring levels of fuckery. The month all three PC games mags ran a *Commandos 2* cover was a great example – PCG had the exclusive, but the other two had managed to source the assets from foreign mags and ran it before we did. Genuinely hilarious.

### Standout moments

There were a lot of messy adventures. We were all in our 20s, and basically treated it as an extension of our student life, a kind of boozy postgrad in games. PC Gamer was something of a pirate crew of a magazine – one of the last of the swaggering crews. It was a weird life. Hell. I used to get into a local club for free because a bouncer really liked my review of one of the *Thief* games. I always remember Jim Rossignol and I talking game theory while throwing down. Was it Flynn or Pierce who were dared to hit on someone by saying "Q2DM1... great fucking level"?

**KIERON GILLEN**
*Former writer*

**TENURE**
1998 - 2003

**CURRENTLY**
Author

**FAVOURITE GAMES**
*Deus Ex, Planescape Torment, Thief, Sacrifce, ZangbandTK*

But if I'm giving a single story, here's a less decadent one. Ashton [James Ashton, editor 1999-2000] was about to go and redesign the magazine, which meant two weeks away, so he asks me if I can handle looking after the mag for that period. Next day, I wake up, and feel off. I go to work, and then go home. I'm coming through the door, and feel the worst pain in my life, and drop to the floor. I have no idea what's going on. Ashton gets me into hospital and the last memory before going under was the doctor, having realised my day job, telling me that he's a huge fan of comedy doctor game *Theme Hospital*. Just as the blackness consumes me I think, "Oh god. I'm going to die."

### Favourite piece

My *Deus Ex* review is the one everyone talks about. It was a big swaggering review of a game I adored, and powered by a recent break-up. Some people go to the gym and transform themselves. I decided that I'd show her what she was missing through the medium of a PC game review. Even worse, it worked. Twenty-somethings are weird. When I was freelance, the epic The Cradle piece I wrote for Mark Donald deserves a mention. A sprawling piece of maps, interviews, examination, theory and everything else. It's rare that a game [*Thief 3*] has a level good enough to justify that kind of exploration, so I was incredibly grateful that Mark gave me the space to go for it.

### Favourite cover

The single cover which immediately leaped to mind was actually our *Halo* preview cover. I believe we were the first magazine in the world to do one. I saw it at E3, and wrote the feature up. Anyway – issue comes out with the cover. Decent enough. In retrospect, Ashton wished he had added an exclamation mark after the 'Meet the game of the year', but you can't have everything. After the issue has gone to press and is on the way to the shops, it's announced that *Halo* is going to be an Xbox exclusive. Lowest selling issue of the year. Fuckers.

### Favourite regular

Anything with puns. The news section. The reviews big words. I'm sort of known for my punning, in my work and when I was on Twitter. I didn't always have a particular interest in puns. It was absolutely trained into me at PC Gamer. We'd be sitting there, and someone would shout out the basis of a story or a game like, "flight sim, not very good," and the whole office would shout out puns to use in the title, in a word-play deathmatch.

### PC Gamer's legacy

When I arrived into games journalism, there was a clear truism born of all the evidence – games mags lasted for five years, tops. PC Gamer has proved that wrong, and has become something more than an institution. Even way back then, people were still saying "PC gaming is dying" and we – and PC Gamer – continue to dance on everyone else's corpses.

Edge too, but as always, DEATH TO EDGE! DEATH TO THE ETERNAL ENEMY! I'm reminded of the first time I freelanced for them, and I asked another writer for advice. "Write what you would for PC Gamer, and take out all the jokes." Wise. ■

# "Tim Edwards and I dressed up as spies and took photos around Bath"

## Former editor ROSS ATHERTON on dressing up, landmark reviews and working with great people

**ROSS ATHERTON**
*Former editor*

**TENURE**
1998 - 2009

**CURRENTLY**
Communication partner at Inter IKEA Systems

**FAVOURITE GAMES**
*Warhammer III: Total War, Baldur's Gate, RDR2, Skyrim*

### In the beginning...

PCG was my first job, straight out of university. I vividly remember turning up in Bath to be interviewed by Jim Flynn. I was in a suit, he wore tracksuit bottoms with holes in. I started as the editorial and production assistant in August.

### The gaming industry

From 1998 to 2009 saw a lot of changes and the birth of a lot of major franchises, although of course you rarely realise that at the time. In my first week at Future, Mark Donald was reviewing *Half-Life* and we put out a lurid yellow issue, which I still have, of 202 pages. Technology shifted fast too. The spread of high-speed internet put pressure on the cover disc model, meaning we had to continually refocus on what value we were offering to readers.

I mostly remember the people rather than the games, events, or trips. Working alongside Matt Pierce, Kieron Gillen, Jim Rossignol, Tim Edwards, Tom Francis, Tony Ellis, Steve Brown, Craig Pearson, Mark Sutherns, Kate Little, Mark Wynne, Graham Smith, Andrew 'Beast' Hind and many others, including outstanding freelancers like Tim Stone, formed me professionally and socially. Playing games and having fun with people you love – and that came across on the page.

### Memorable moments

Photoshoots were always a highlight and the first thing you'd check when the initial print run came back. I remember another where Tim Edwards and I dressed up as spies and took photos around Bath pretending to hand over briefcases while looking shifty. I think it was to illustrate a story about game industry leaks.

### Standout issues

One issue, we lost several cover stories in quick succession and had nothing to go with one week before deadline. I called up Doug Lombardi at Valve and begged him to let us take a look at something I knew they had in the pipe, although I knew it was too early. To my enormous relief he agreed. We sent Jim Rossignol over the next day to take a look, patched together some grimy cover art, and ended up with the world exclusive on *Left 4 Dead*. Another Valve scoop was the *Orange Box* issue, which we put out in an actual orange cardboard box.

**BELOW:** This is how all PC games are made so we've been told.

### Favourite piece

As you'll know from doing Top 100 lists or similar, the experience of playing a particular game in a particular era can't be replicated later. Playing *Doom* in a dark room in 1993 was truly terrifying in a way it isn't today – and no other game can either, because our senses and expectations change. So I prefer to think of moments: reviewing *Baldur's Gate* as my first big task on the mag and experiencing that dawning realisation that it was truly special. Planning out your *Total War* strategies in your head while trying to get to sleep. Just existing in *Skyrim* or *Red Dead Redemption 2*.

### PC Gamer's legacy

Writing about videogames should never take itself too seriously, and I think PCG has usually managed to stay on the right side of that line. It's a passion for millions, and means even more than that to many. Fundamentally a brand like PCG, in print or on screen, is about entertainment. As a great writer once said, "It's all about the lolz". That's why PCG has lasted this long. ■

# "I could barely hold up the camera for laughing!"

## JIM ROSSIGNOL on team jokes, mad photoshoots, and bad MMOs

**JIM ROSSIGNOL**
*Former writer*

**TENURE**
2000 - 2008

**CURRENTLY**
Author, game designer and publisher

**FAVOURITE GAMES**
*Quake III, Eve Online, STALKER, Hunt Showdown, Half-Life*

### In the beginning...

After university I was at a loss as to what to do with my life, and was eventually fired from my first job, in no small part for playing *Quake III*. Fortunately, as we lounged around one evening, my friends noticed the advert for staff writer and insisted I apply for it. I felt there was no way I could get the job, and that I knew nothing suitable about PC games, but I was wrong, and as it turned out PCG needed a massive nerd to talk about the internet and online first-person shooter games.

### The gaming industry

Bad MMOs, amazing mods. The years I was on the mag was a time when just incredibly awful MMOs came out almost monthly, and I had to have some opinion on them. I can remember some of the idling-based resource gathering of some of the Korean MMOs, where vast collections of players stood 'mining' on hillsides, with [writer] John Walker occasionally logging on to remonstrate with them, or another MMO which had areas labelled "monsters" and "trees", where you went to do the thing, and watch numbers go up. Of course the era also had the very best of the MMO crop, *World of Warcraft*, *EVE*, *Planetside* and others, but it was the bad ones that kept on coming, and I kept on having to review.

### Standout moments

I don't know the origin of the "and in the game" reaction joke, but I remember with powerful clarity the first time I heard it: on my very first day in the office we were all stood around Ross Atherton's PC as he played a *Baldur's Gate* expansion, and he said, walking into the trap completely, "As you can see, I haven't got any friends". "And in the game!" chimed the gang. Oh how we laughed. Poor old Ross.

### Favourite piece

Perhaps my most notable moment was being the first person to review *Half-Life 2*, and a little later, being the first person on the team to play, although not review, *Portal*. However, with hindsight, I think when I wrote, in the first small article mentioning this little *Minecraft* game, that it would "probably be quite popular", well, that might have been my finest moment. Oh and that back page where Kieron dressed up as a mime. I could barely hold up the camera for laughing!

### Favourite cover

Either Alyx on the cover of 163, or the *Black & White* cover for the memories of our art editor and publisher struggling with how to make a giant pink rhino into an attractive cover.

### Favourite section

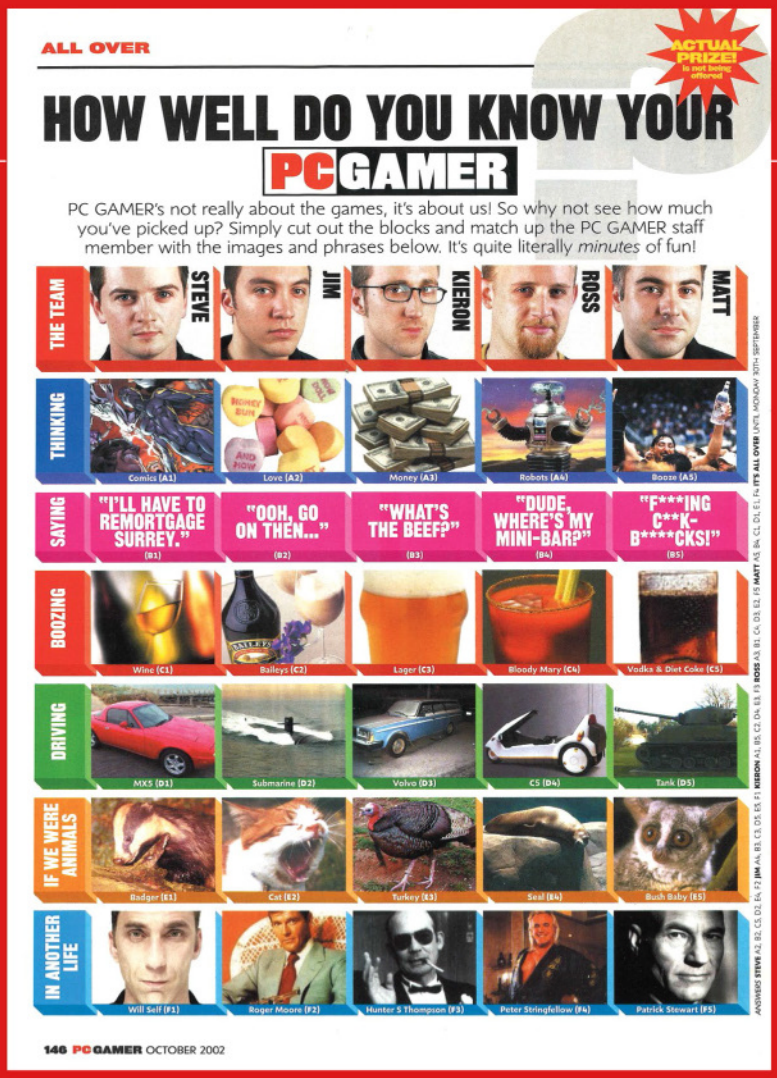
From my point of view the trickiest and therefore most memorable section was Netware, which dealt with the internet in that tricky period when gaming was not wholly online, and there was some sort of delineation between offline games and what happened on the internet. It was so of its time and remains a sort of archive of the era. We really had no idea what we were doing, and the results were therefore amazing.

### PC Gamer's legacy

PC Gamer was formative for me personally, but looking around at my peers I can see how it had an extraordinary effect on anyone who was involved with it. That influence and opportunity to work on a clever and creative publication really has had an influence on the gaming industry, but also culture more broadly. The PC Gamer diaspora have moved off to work on other things, creating websites, comics, games of all kinds, books and even movies and TV shows. Perhaps that demonstrates the kind of talent the magazine has attracted over the years, or perhaps it shows what an amazing crucible for talent a games magazine can be. Probably a bit of both. Long may that continue, I say.

### Half-Life 3

I strongly believe that it is finished and has not been released for important secret reasons. One day the truth will come out. But the game will not. ■



ALL OVER

ACTUAL PRIZE! (is not being offered)

HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW YOUR PCGAMER

PC GAMER's not really about the games, it's about us! So why not see how much you've picked up? Simply cut out the blocks and match up the PC GAMER staff member with the images and phrases below. It's quite literally *minutes* of fun!

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| THE TEAM | STEVE | JIM | KIERON | ROSS | MATT |
| THINKING | Comics (A1) | Love (A2) | Money (A3) | Robots (A4) | Booze (A5) |
| SAYING | "I'LL HAVE TO REMORTGAGE SURREY." (B1) | "OOH, GO ON THEN..." (B2) | "WHAT'S THE BEEF?" (B3) | "DUDE, WHERE'S MY MINI-BAR?" (B4) | "F***ING C**K-B****CKS!" (B5) |
| BOOZING | Wine (C1) | Baileys (C2) | Lager (C3) | Bloody Mary (C4) | Vodka & Diet Coke (C5) |
| DRIVING | MX5 (D1) | Submarine (D2) | Volvo (D3) | C5 (D4) | Tank (D5) |
| IF WE WERE ANIMALS | Badger (E1) | Cat (E2) | Turkey (E3) | Seal (E4) | Bush Baby (E5) |
| IN ANOTHER LIFE | Will Self (F1) | Roger Moore (F2) | Hunter S Thompson (F3) | Peter Stringfellow (F4) | Patrick Stewart (F5) |

ANSWERS: STEVE A2, B2, C5, D2, E4, F2 | JIM A4, B1, C3, D5, E5, F1 | KIERON A1, B5, C2, D4, E3, F3 | ROSS A3, B3, C4, D3, E2, F5 | MATT A5, B4, C1, D1, E1, F4 | IT'S ALL OVER UNTIL MONDAY 30TH SEPTEMBER

146 PCGAMER OCTOBER 2002

# "It's the world's best gaming magazine. Just don't tell Edge"

## Former editor MATTHEW PIERCE on industry legends

### In the beginning...

With a biological sciences degree under my belt, I've no idea why I felt I was qualified to apply for a staff writer position on PC Gamer, and subsequently felt a complete fraud in my interview with the then editor Jim Flynn and deputy Steve Owen. I can only assume the other candidates were appalling. Or Jim and Steve were drunk. Both could be true, to be honest.

### The gaming industry

I joined Future in Jan 1997, so pre-Google, and at the point when floppy disks were being replaced by CD-ROMs. A time of change then, and in retrospect, an incredibly rich period for gaming which saw many of today's biggest franchises launched. *Diablo* had come out the month before I joined, and in my first two years on the mag, we saw the release of the original *Baldur's Gate*, *Half-Life*, *Fallout*, *Age of Empires*, *StarCraft*, *Unreal*, as well as dozens of classics like *Thief*, *Grim Fandango*, *Quake II*, *Blade Runner* and many more.

### Life on the mag

The mag back then was like an extension of being at uni. We'd do almost no work for the first week or so, and then have to do late nights for a fortnight, often writing reams of stuff late into the evening based on a couple of pieces of concept art, or low-res renders. No wonder we went to the pub every night.

It really was the best and worst of times. The pay was terrible, but I think we felt like we had the best jobs in the world, and many of us came in on Saturdays just to take advantage of the office setup. LAN games of *C&C*, *Warcraft*, *Quake* and *Counter-Strike* remain some of my favourite gaming memories of all time.

**MATTHEW PIERCE**
*Former editor*

**TENURE**
1997 - 2003

**CURRENTLY**
Managing director – games, film and TV at Future PLC

**FAVOURITE GAMES**
*Quake III, C&C: Red Alert, Day of the Tentacle, Skyrim and RDR2*

### Favourite piece

Someone whose words I always looked forward to receiving, and that never failed to be beautifully written, were Tim Stone's. Tim's an expert in wargaming and sims, and he had a real lightness of touch when it came to expressing his incredible knowledge and expertise. I think it's testament to Tim's writing that I enjoyed his work so much despite never really playing that genre myself at all.

### Favourite regular

The back page [It's All Over], has always been the best or the worst of the mag depending on the idea. And that's how it should be, I think.

### The gaming industry

I'm genuinely delighted that it's in the robust state it is now. I remember for years hearing about the inevitable 'death of PC gaming' and how consoles would make PCs obsolete, so it's wonderful to see it still at the forefront of game development.

### The most interesting person

Too many to name, but a few who stand out: John Romero and Tom Hall, interviewed in the heady early days of Ion Storm; a trip to id's office to play *Quake III* with Tim Willits, Todd Hollenshead, John Carmack and co; Demis Hassabis demoing *Republic The Revolution* for us in the office, a few years before he became one of the world's leading AI brains; the likes of Peter Molyneux, Chris Sawyer [*RollerCoaster Tycoon*] and Jason and Chris Kingsley from Rebellion are fascinating interviewees too.

### PC Gamer's legacy

It's the world's best gaming magazine. Just don't tell Edge. ■

**TOP LEFT:** A classic (is that the right word?) All Over from Matt's tenure as editor.

# "I ended up writing a whole parody of Heat magazine"

## RICHARD COBBETT on writing for PC Gamer for 15 years

**RICHARD COBBETT**
*Former writer*

**TENURE**
2000 - 2015

**CURRENTLY**
Game developer

**FAVOURITE GAMES**
*Ultima VII, Monkey Island 2, Doom II, Planescape Torment*

### In the beginning...

I joined Future after getting midway through a compsci degree that mostly taught me that I didn't want any job that was going to come of it. So eventually I plucked up the courage to phone PC Gamer and squeak nervously about whether or not they had any freelance going. They said no. Sigh. Then I wrote a piece for another games site at Future which inspired Kieron Gillen to send an email calling me a meanie. I twisted that into a commission and then pretty much refused to bugger off.

### Standout moments

I do recall once going along to an event for some *Guitar Hero*-style karaoke game, trying it, and the game immediately hard crashing at the sound of my voice. I took the hint.

### Favourite piece

The two that jump instantly to mind are the time I ended up writing a whole parody of Heat magazine, for reasons that I'm sure made... some sense at the time... and the Crap Shoot column that I wrote for many years on the website. Despite the name, it wasn't about bad games, but weird and wonderful oddities... some of which did of course suck in entertaining ways – things like a beat-'em-up based on Les Miserables, or games with amazing names like *Bert Higgins: The Man From HELL*.

### The most memorable cover

Honestly, my favourites are mostly the glimpses of the ones that never saw print, like the *Escape From Monkey Island* cover where the provided art was so bad that it was just a flat out 'no'.

### Favourite regular

It was always the back half of the magazine, where people would just get space to talk about what they were into at the time. The internet has always been amazing for finding out everything about things you know you want to find, but magazines were always unmatched for finding out what you didn't know you were into. Free of the need for scores and big words and criticism, it was the section of the mag that really leaned into the love that everyone had for PC gaming, and a chance to celebrate things beyond their five seconds of scourging in the review pits.

### The gaming industry

My first PC was an Amstrad 1512, so... I've seen most of it first hand. It's been a rollercoaster, from the highs of *Doom*, to the lows of the late 1990s. The part that I love though is that it remains an open platform where anyone can, theoretically, grab a tool like Godot or Game Maker or even Unreal and make something awesome.

### The most interesting person

I don't think I'll ever forget watching Peter Molyneux trying to demonstrate the controls in *Black & White* by repeatedly failing to hit a castle with a rock.

### PC Gamer's legacy

I remember loving the mag from the very first issue, so the fact that it's still around is both an awesome thing, and a testament to everyone who's worked on it. It's been a pretty long time since I wrote anything for it, but it was always a real pleasure and an honour. Oh, and John Walker was still wrong about *Zork: Grand Inquisitor*, which was great, so there.

### Half-Life 3

The real *Half-Life 3* was inside us all along. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts. ■

REVIEWS

LORDS OF EVERQUEST

Snorecraft III: The Frozen Groan.

SAKTI'S

"...Wants to be Warcraft III so much that it hurts."

Feudal

# "What we got were full-size DIY warhammers in the post"

## Production editor TONY ELLIS on being PC Gamer magazine's gatekeeper

### In the beginning...

I was production editor on PC Gamer from 2003 to 2017. That's probably long enough. Before that I'd been a staffer on various Future PC magazines since 1996, when I lucked my way onto the long-forgotten PC Attack straight out of uni. Back then, Future had the energy and excitement of a start-up: lunchtime drinks lasted all afternoon and you worked until the small hours to hit print deadline. Good times.

### Life on the mag

It was a rollercoaster. *Thief: Deadly Shadows* and other titles had a loading screen every five rooms to fit the constraints of Xbox. Microsoft seemed to actively want to destroy PC gaming. At the same time, *PlanetSide* was pioneering sci-fi battles with hundreds of simultaneous players. Most of all, the modding/home dev scene was unlocking gaming for everyone: every issue we were showcasing new and wildly original experiences you just couldn't get on console.

### Standout moments

There was the American press trip where I blundered into my motel room at 1am to find a naked cowboy in my bed. Or the mag competition where we rashly asked readers, "What *is* a warhammer?' We wanted diagrams. What we got were full-size DIY warhammers in the post. Wooden warhammers. Cast iron warhammers. Motorised warhammers. Six-foot-tall warhammers too heavy for us to lift that came in their own coffin-size casket. They just kept coming.

### Favourite Piece

About a month after PCG had the major, art-led redesign that essentially turned it into the magazine you see today, we ran a huge feature by Kieron on *Zangband*. An ugly, nerdy, ASCII-art roguelike. I'm still proud of that to this day. It was a line in the sand, a statement that said 'great PC games aren't just the overpriced,

**TONY ELLIS**
*Former prod ed*

**TENURE**
2003 - 2017

**CURRENTLY**
Writing his novel

**FAVOURITE GAMES**
*Deus Ex, Planescape Torment, MGSV, Immortality, Far Cry 4*

**BELOW:** We're not sure who we should be most worried about.

commercial product you can play on console, and we're here to celebrate that with you'.

### Favourite regular

Extra Life. Once upon a time, games magazines did previews, reviews, features, and that was about it. This was something new. This was the team doing what we did every Friday night in the pub, but now in the magazine: telling stories and enthusing about the games we were enjoying right now. Old games. Indie games. Mods. It was, and remains, the absolute essence of what we wanted to do with PC Gamer.

### The gaming industry

PC gaming is more commodified now, but holy shit, have you seen the games? The blockbusters are more immersive, the indie games wilder and wiser, than they've ever been before. We live in a glorious age. Space games! Art games! Sex games! I count myself hugely lucky to have been part of the scene during its fervid, discovery-filled adolescence, but I hold no illusions: the best time to be a PC gamer is right now.

### PC Gamer's legacy

I banned the word 'gameplay'. Freelancers spluttered, Americans fainted, but it was an absolute joy to watch PCG's writers rally behind the idea that they had to find their own words to describe games instead of jokes and generalisations. PC Gamer's house style was that it didn't have a house style: we wanted writers to write in their own voice and write well, and I'll always be proud of that. ■

# "I walked out thinking, 'Is this what meetings are like here?'"

**TOM FRANCIS** on PC Gamer's collective voice and shared values

**TOM FRANCIS**
*Former writer*

**TENURE**
2004 - 2013

**CURRENTLY**
Game developer

**FAVOURITE GAMES**
*Deus Ex: HR, The Outer Wilds, Slay the Spire, Spelunky HD, Deus Ex*

## In the beginning...

I moved to Bath not knowing PC Gamer was based there. I was doing temp work in a skateboard factory, a car dealership, the NHS, and eventually Future Publishing's coverdisc support department. Later, they needed a coverdisc editor. I had to find out what that was, and it must have been a less coveted position because I at least got an interview. I got the job and weaselled my way into being a writer from there.

## The gaming industry

For me, it was defined by the rise of indie games. At the time Steam was starting to experiment with distributing non-Valve games. Steam really felt like the missing link that was needed for folks like Introversion and 2D Boy to get the scale of success they deserved, and it was wonderful to see cases of that go from a rarity to an explosion over the years. That's also what ended my games journalism career: I played *Spelunky*, found out it was made in Game Maker, and started to wonder if I could make something of my own.

## Standout moments

I still remember my first meeting at PCG, almost cry-laughing as Mark Sutherns described a story he wanted to cover: a gang of drive-by carpenters in *Ultima Online* were imprisoning people by building four chairs around them simultaneously, blocking every direction of movement with furniture the victim didn't have permission to move or destroy. I walked out thinking, "Is this what meetings are like here?" And 19 years later that's still the one I remember, so I guess the rest were garbage.

**BELOW:** John dropped the Extra Life icon in 2015 because it made the section look like a gents toilet.

## Favourite piece

My *Galactic Civilizations II* war diary was probably the most fun. I was playing the longest possible match in the largest possible galaxy, with all the AIs on random difficulty levels. My diary of it, which I posted on our blog as I went, ran to 23 entries.

## Favourite regular

Why I Love is a small regular where a writer picks one element from a game and just describes the joy of it. The boot in *Dark Messiah*, a bugged-out NPC in *Oblivion*, the Irish pub in *Broken Sword*. My favourite games writing is specific, enthusiastic and entertaining, and this always brought that out of us.

## The most interesting person

My most interesting interview was with Gabe Newell, Erik Johnson and Doug Lombardi. I asked, "What do you think Valve has failed at?" and they talked for about 40 minutes, revealing all kinds of weird and calamitous stories from their past.

## PC Gamer's legacy

What I loved about being part of PC Gamer was the way we collectively formed and honoured a particular voice and set of shared values. I don't know a faster way to go from being a snotty little gamer trying to impress with pretentious or profane language choices, to zeroing in on a style that's strong, clear, conversational and funny. Credit for a lot of that goes to Tony Ellis, production editor for all nine years of my time there and more besides. No one has a lower bullshit tolerance when it comes to the English language. ■

# "It was the best education in media and gaming I could ever have imagined"

## How PC Gamer inspired former editor TIM EDWARDS

**TIM EDWARDS**
*Former editor*

**TENURE**
2002 - 2012

**CURRENTLY**
Publishing director, Network N

**FAVOURITE GAMES**
*TIE Fighter, WoW, Half-Life 2, Battlefield 2, Minecraft*

### In the beginning...

I was a PC Gamer forumite when they started the old forums. I loved it. And I just sort of decided, "Right, I want to write for PC Gamer. This is all I care about now". So I went for work experience and loved it. Off the back of work experience, there was a trip to Russia that no one in the team wanted to do. I went, "I'll do it!" Then I was working as an in-house freelancer for about a year until I finally threw my toys out of the pram, and said, "You have to make me a member of staff now, guys".

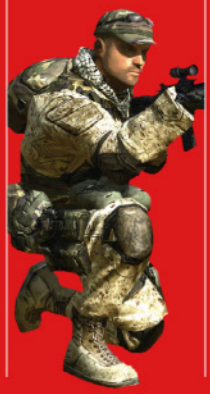
### The gaming industry

When I was about 16 or 17, *Half-Life* came out. And I remember getting the mag, and reading the review, and thinking, "This can't be true. No game is going to be as good as this". I built it up in my head, and built it up in my head. I was at boarding school at the time, and I got a PC in my bedroom. So the morning it came out I bought a copy. I got it back, installed it, and played it at break time – like, the opening tram ride. "Oh, shit, it's actually as good as they say it was." And then I intentionally made myself violently ill, so that I was called sick and, basically, I could just sit and play the game for the rest of the day. I played truant at boarding school so I could play *Half-Life*.

### Life on the mag

I remember when *Half-Life 2* came out. We installed Steam, and got it all ready. And then Craig and Tom, they came to the office at like 8am when it was going to unlock, because their internet was shit, and it was great in the office. I came in, and they were wearing party hats. They had little party poppers and things going on.

The privilege we had, being around stuff we loved, and access, and knowing that we could just call or find the people we care about – because they probably love the same stuff that we do – it was an amazing time. It was the best education in media and gaming I could ever have imagined.



### The redesign

The thing that I did – I didn't redesign it, but I killed off the coverdisc. I was so determined just to get it in the bin because it was so pointless. We would spend ages sourcing demos, and the copyright status of those demos and everything else was always in flux.

We always used to have a video of maybe *Soldier of Fortune* on the coverdisc. The only reason we did that was so that we'd always get an 18 rating, because we didn't have the ability to get the demos rated in time to get them to the newsstand. So we realised that if we got the magazine an 18 rating every time by putting the *Soldier of Fortune* video on the disc, we wouldn't have to go back and fuck around with getting everything else rated.

### PC Gamer's legacy

I think it's always had an incredibly privileged position because of staying power and because it's always been good. That's the first thing to say. As an owner of another PC games media business, I'm jealous of everything it can achieve. I think it says something that people just want to stick around it, whether they're working on it, or whether they're still reading it.

It is, and it was, a huge part of my life for 12 years. It was pretty much all I thought about. I miss being part of it. ■

# "I loved PC Gamer and wanted to do right by it"

## Fomer editor SAMUEL ROBERTS on PC Gamer's enduring importance

### In the beginning...

I started reading PC Gamer when I was ten, after my dad brought home a copy of PCG 63 – the *Half-Life* review issue. The magazine was incredibly significant to me throughout the late '90s and early '00s, and fundamental in shaping my gaming tastes: from *Command & Conquer* to *Max Payne*, it charted my journey through PC gaming. When Graham Smith left PC Gamer in 2013, I had the opportunity to come in as editor on this magazine I read as a kid. I loved PC Gamer and wanted to do right by it.

### Life on the mag

I partly joined PC Gamer because PC gaming was at the start of the renaissance we're still living in now: the rise of indie games, the return of dormant PC genres like sims and turn-based games, Games For Windows Live being banished to memory, Early Access on Steam just taking off. It was a very exciting time.

### Standout moments

There was the boxout where we all compared our characters' randomly generated penis sizes in *Rust* – that one feels like it hasn't stood the test of time...

My favourite mag memory is when former section editor Andy Kelly created the *ARMA 3* Olympics, using the Zeus Mode tools in that game to create a series of sports-style challenges for the rest of the team to overcome – kart racing while the track was being bombed, that sort of thing. That was so much fun.

### Your greatest exclusive

It felt like a big deal when we revealed *Dawn of War III* to the world because literally no one else had seen it – the same was true of *Civ: Beyond Earth* when we revealed that.

**SAMUEL ROBERTS**
*Former editor*

**TENURE**
2013 - 2017

**CURRENTLY**
PR manager, Frontier

**FAVOURITE GAMES**
*C&C: Red Alert, Deus Ex, Age of Empires II, Max Payne 2*

### The gaming industry

PC gaming remains the most vibrant and exciting place for games – it's the beating heart of all games, I'd argue. All indie breakouts happen on PC first. It can generate a phenomenon in a matter of days or even hours like nothing else.

### The redesign

We redesigned the magazine in 2015, and at that point we stripped down the news section, which had become more and more pointless over time – tons of magazines have reckoned with this in recent years. We added bits to the Extra Life section, which is the part everyone enjoyed making the most. We also started producing more in the way of retro-type features when we ran the magazine, like genre deep dives, which started to hit just as nostalgia for '90s and '00s stuff started to crest.

### Your gaming now

I just finished the *My House* mod in *Doom II*, which is genuinely one of the best games of 2023, and my favourite horror game since *Alien: Isolation*. Mind-bending, mythical stuff. I recommend watching John Romero stream it if you have a spare 30 minutes and can't be bothered to download the WAD.

### PC Gamer's legacy

PC Gamer can set the agenda for PC gaming like no other outlet can for the platforms they cover. That's because PC gaming has no platform holder – it's vast, and desperately needs sensible voices to tell players what matters. PC Gamer magazine allows writers to be their weirdest and most eccentric selves in guiding players, without the horrors of Google algorithms to contend with. Treasure it.

**TOP LEFT:** One of a split run of four gold foil blocked *Dawn of War* covers.

**BELOW:** Five PC Gamer writers, one photo studio.

# "I think a lot about Deus Ex. Specifically: could Deus Ex even be made today?"

## PCG's editor-in-chief PHIL SAVAGE recalls fun times

**PHIL SAVAGE**
*Former editor*

**TENURE**
2015 - 2019

**CURRENTLY**
Editor-in-chief, PC Gamer

**FAVOURITE GAMES**
*Deus Ex, Dishonored 2, RDR2, Team Fortress 2*

### In the beginning...

Before PC Gamer, I was just a hobbyist writer, posting about games to a personal blog. Former PCG section editor Tom Francis clearly liked my stuff enough to offer the occasional freelance commission for the Extra Life section, which became a steady gig. Eventually, I was offered a position as a full-time news writer for the website. I've stuck around ever since.

### Life on the mag

I became editor of the mag in 2017, and it's easy to see the direct line from then to now. More console exclusives were being ported over to PC, studios like Larian were making instant classics that lived up to the legacy of PC gaming's history, and PUBG's release would set the stage for *Fortnite*'s reinvention as a battle royale – itself largely responsible for the live service craze we see today.

### The evolution

We'd already made a bunch of Extra Life additions and tweaks back when I was deputy editor, so I was pretty happy with that section. Instead, my focus as editor was to add more value to Monitor. We toned down its focus on news and instead made it about gaming as a hobby – the industry that makes games and the communities that enjoy them.

### Favourite piece

I think one of my best pieces of writing remains the *Kerbal Space Program* review. It had been in Early Access for a while, so I knew pretty early on that I was going to give it 96% – making it one of just a handful of games to get what was, at that time, the highest score PC Gamer's UK mag had awarded. I knew the review had to justify a historic score, and in that instance I think it did.

I was also extremely happy with the edition of The Spy published in issue #335, my last as editor of the mag. Obviously nobody knows who The Spy is – each issues' copy is taped to a seagull who hangs around the Greggs opposite PC Gamer's Bath office – but I'm glad that we were given a high-concept meditation on the nature of change and maintaining a connection with the past in such a personally significant issue.

### The gaming industry

Like many PC Gamer writers over the history of its existence, I think a lot about *Deus Ex*. Specifically: could *Deus Ex* even be made today? As games get increasingly more expensive to make, I worry that we're missing out on what's possible when you instead focus on really nailing the systems that could truly push a genre forward. *Deus Ex* was an ugly even for its time – that's just not why people love it. Imagine a big-budget game of today spending a fraction of the cost of how it looks to really nail the depth of interaction and possibility! Of course, when I think this, a game like *Baldur's Gate III* comes along and hits you in the face by doing it all so well. So maybe we're fine.

### Life on the mag

Mostly just a hazy recollection of desperately brainstorming ideas for back page jokes in the hours before we went to press. I'll be honest: if I was half as organised as the editors that followed me, the mag would have probably been a lot better.

### Half-Life 3

We're more likely to get *Half-Life 3* than we are a meaningful new update for *Team Fortress 2*. ■

# "I love to see PC Gamer still going strong in 2023"

## Fomer magazine editor ROBIN VALENTINE remembers odd times

### Life on the mag

It was definitely an odd period, both for games and magazines, because my tenure coincided pretty much perfectly with the pandemic. Suddenly we couldn't do trips and events, all the games companies were thrown for a loop, and I was making a magazine out of my spare bedroom!

### Favourite issue

Something we did that was really cathartic in that period was the Escape Your World issue – a special all based around escapism in games and our favourite videogame worlds, as a kind of antidote to how trapped inside we were all feeling at the time. We did a bunch of really beautiful variant covers and I just loved taking all these negative things we were all feeling and putting a positive, celebratory spin on them.

**ROBIN VALENTINE**
*Former editor*

**TENURE**
2019 - 2022

**CURRENTLY**
Senior editor, PC Gamer

**FAVOURITE GAMES**
*The Witcher 3, Fallout: New Vegas, Baldur's Gate III, XCOM 2, Slay the Spire*

### Your number one

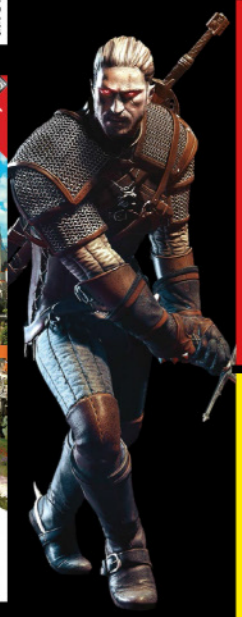
I think my favourite PC game ever is *The Witcher 3*. Partly it's just because it came out in a period when I had the free time to really invest in a massive game like that, but I still think it's the most astonishing open world we've ever been treated to. Just absurdly rich with engrossing stories to discover.

### PC Gamer's legacy

I love to see PC Gamer magazine still going strong in 2023. Even as someone who's jumped ship to the website, I still think there's a spirit of curation and personality in games magazines that's really special, and PCG has always been one of the most distinct and interesting voices around.

### Half-Life 3

*Half-Life 3*? Forget it. The question you should be asking is: when are we getting *Left 4 Dead 3*? ■



## TO ART

*Celebrating PC Gamer's talented art crew*

**"It's my third tour of duty for The Spy. She's been painted, she's been digital... she's been 'she', and she's been 'he'. And she keeps going, just like PCG!"**

**DAVID LYTTLETON**
Spy illustrator, 2003 - present

**"PCG blossomed in the boom period when games mags were as innovative as any other genre on the shelves. A hothouse of brilliant writers, it was, and still is, a rare example of a magazine with a beating heart."**

**MARK WYNNE**
Former Art Editor, 2000-2006

**"I've loved games since I was a kid and getting to work on PC Gamer is a real privilege... even when you're trying to make a GPU float with fishing wire!"**

**OLLY CURTIS**
Photographer, 2013 - present

**"The people I worked with on PCG were legendary, so much talent was crammed into our little team. I really found my feet as a designer and in life while on the mag."**

**ANDREW HIND**
Former Dep. Art Editor, 2000-2006

# "I watched Tim and Andy stage a mock sword fight in the office with huge three-foot purple dildos"

## Long-time art editor JOHN STRIKE on making the mag look pretty

### In the beginning...

As a kid I was a subscriber to PC Gamer and I loved every issue. I remember borrowing the only mobile phone in the school off a buddy and ringing home at break time to see if my subscription copy had arrived. Unless I wanted to build nuclear submarines, change B&B bedsheets or chase sheep, there were no jobs for me in Cumbria. And so I moved to Bath in 2006. I started as designer on PlayStation 2 Magazine, then deputy art editor of Xbox World 360 in 2008 and eventually I became art editor of PC Gamer in 2011.

### Standout moments

On my first day at Future, I ran over to Matt Pierce and asked him to sign a copy of PC Gamer for me, then during the afterparty event for The PC Gamer Weekender in 2018 a reader came up to me and asked me to sign his magazine. It's the only time I've been recognised by a reader.

Also, watching Tim Edwards and Andy Kelly stage a mock sword fight in the office with two huge purple dildos sent to us by the *Saints Row* PR has always stuck in my mind for some reason.

### The evolution

We've done several different levels of redesign since 2011, the biggest being in 2015, spearheaded by the very talented Graham Dalzell. Having been on the magazine for a while, each new editor has brought their own fresh ideas, so I'd say it's definitely the editors who help drive the evolution of the magazine, I'm just the vehicle that gets them there.

Day-to-day I make sure the magazine looks its best and is consistent, that screenshots on a page aren't repetitive or too dull and the cover has impact and newsstand appeal that's carried through into its in-mag features. If that sounds boring, then it's also my job to spend one day per month fannying around in a photo studio trying to suspend a headset from a fishing wire and wipe chippy finger marks and the odd short curly hair off gaming peripherals. Boy, do I hope it's just beard hair.

### Favourite piece

I love the Now Playings and personal pieces. I was very grateful to be commissioned to write a feature for the magazine in issue 253 about my 15 years as an *Operation Flashpoint* gaming clan founder. It was a pleasure to write and design and hats off to Graham Smith for letting me do it.

### PC Gamer's legacy

Being able to work on PC Gamer is an honour, particularly alongside the talented staff namechecked throughout this feature.

Ultimately though the heroes of the magazine are the readers, because without them we wouldn't be here. People who believe in the magic of print as much as us will mean we keep celebrating birthdays like this.

In the digital age we live in print is more important than ever. It's something tangeable and has presence. It's a permanent commitment to what we write and create that's to be celebrated.

We should all hail print, because when times get tough you can't wipe your arse with a website. ■

**JOHN STRIKE**
*Art editor*

**TENURE**
2011 - present

**CURRENTLY**
Still the art editor of PC Gamer. I feel like when Father Jack sobers up: "Oh my god I'm still on that feckin' island".

**FAVOURITE GAMES**
*Dune 2, C&C, Doom, Quake II, Half-Life, Operation Flashpoint, Battlefield: Bad Company 2*

**BELOW LEFT:** Hardware shoots involve a lot of coffee, a large sheet of coloured paper and a duster.

PC GAMER

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PC GAMER

# REVIEW

## HOW WE REVIEW

**We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.**

### DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

### EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

### THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

## OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

**00%-09%** Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.
**Example** *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

**10%-19%** We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.
**Example** *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

**20%-29%** Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.
**Examples** *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

**30%-39%** An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.
**Examples** *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

**40%-49%** Flawed and disappointing.
**Examples** *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

**50%-59%** Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.
**Examples** *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

**60%-69%** There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.
**Examples** *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

**70%-79%** A good game that's worth playing. We like it.
**Examples** *Prey, NieR: Automata*

**80%-89%** A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.
**Examples** *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

**90%-94%** A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.
**Examples** *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

**95%-96%** Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.
**Examples** *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

**97%-100%** Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE

**The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.**

**Find out more**
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews

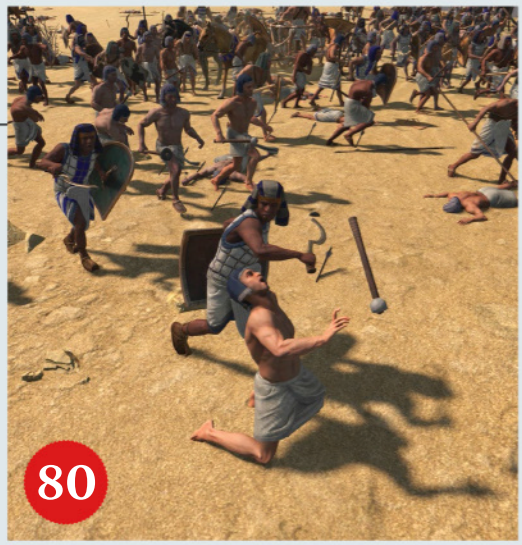
# Bright future

On PC Gamer magazine's 30th anniversary I'm well and truly buoyed by the sheer variety of PC games available to play today. Just look at the disparate genres covered by the PCG reviews machine this month as evidence. We've got action, real-time and turn-based strategy, simulations, deck-building roguelikes, narrative-driven adventures, FPS games and more.

For me, the open and varied landscape that PC gaming offers has always been a key part of its appeal, and while not all of the reviewed games this issue lodge super-high scores, it's hard not to feel enthused about PC gaming's future considering what they offer, and especially so in a year like 2023 that has also treated us to *Baldur's Gate III*, *Starfield* and *Cyberpunk 2077: Phantom Liberty* among many other top games.

**ROBERT JONES**
PRINT EDITOR
robert.jones@futurenet.com

**LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK**
Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



# Contents


66 Assassin's Creed: Mirage
70 **Dune: Spice Wars**
72 Wargroove 2
74 **The Lamplighters League**
78 Forza Motorsport
80 **Total War: Pharaoh**
84 Mineko's Night Market
86 **Astrea: Six-Sided Oracles**

FREE GAMES
88 **Babbdi**
88 Cyberpet Graveyard
89 **Raindrop**
89 Spectacle

THEY'RE BACK
90 **Doom**
91 The 7th Guest
91 **Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers**


## This month's 3DFX Voodoo2-powered reviewers...

**RICK LANE**
**Specialist in**
Chatting with gods
**Currently playing**
*Total War: Pharaoh*
**This month**
Decided with Egyptian god of war Horus that PC Gamer was always better than PC Zone.

**PHIL IWANIUK**
**Specialist in**
Kaz Yamauchi nods
**Currently playing**
*Forza Motorsport*
**This month**
Spent a worrying amount of time ogling virtual race track tarmac. Oh Phil.

**DOMINIC TARASON**
**Specialist in**
Dancing with mouse-folk
**Currently playing**
*Wargroove 2*
**This month**
Gorged on a massive all-you-can-eat popcorn strategy buffet. Om nom nom!

**JON BAILES**
**Specialist in**
Jogging away from fights
**Currently playing**
*The Lamplighters League*
**This month**
Was hired to take down heretical console gamer ne'er-do-wells.

**MATT ELLIOTT**
**Specialist in**
Wearing many helmets
**Currently playing**
*Doom*
**This month**
Had tea and crumpets with John Romero in Jekkad, the realm of demons. Got a bit hot.

# SILENT BUT DEADLY

## ASSASSIN'S CREED MIRAGE is a fun stepping stone back towards the series' roots

*By Morgan Park*

**It's not often that a big-budget videogame feels like it was made according to my exact wishes, and yet *Assassin's Creed Mirage* exists. What was once destined to be an expansion for *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* grew into a standalone throwback to the best of the series that valued stylish kills, freedom of movement, and stealth over quest logs and gear scores. Spiritually, it's a straight bullseye.**

This is the purest stealth game Ubisoft has made in 15 years of *AC*, dense with rooftops, ziplines and fluffy carts of hay in one of the most beautiful cities ever realised in a videogame. When I'm perched on a ledge studying guard routes, mentally noting hiding places, or plotting a risky climb, *Mirage* feels like Ubi at the top of its game. It's a shame, then, that the fluid stealth sandbox is dragged down by all the bad stuff it inherits from the last six years of *AC* RPGs – spammy combat, floaty character movement and parkour that never quite flows as well as it's meant to. I want so badly for classic *Assassin's Creed* to be back like I thought it could be, but in its full 20-hour dose, *Mirage* is more like a stepping stone.

### CLEAN KILL

*Mirage* rewinds the clock a few hundred years before the time of Altaïr to tell the origin story of Basim Ibn Ishaq, a central character from *Valhalla* who earned his stripes hunting the Order of the Ancients (the pre-Crusades name for Templars) in 9th century Baghdad.

The brilliance of *Mirage* is the way it marries Ubi Montreal's original vision of social stealth with a modern interpretation of what a good stealth level is: every mission is a small sandbox with multiple routes and guards that can be picked off, bypassed, or avoided with well-considered sneaking. With the added bonus of an eagle that allows Basim to scout out restricted areas from the sky, it's never been this much fun to actually be sneaky in an *AC* game.

**It's never been this much fun to actually be sneaky in an *AC* game**

It helps that *Mirage*'s toolbag isn't just a carousel of different ways to kill people – Basim carries sleep darts, non-lethal traps, noisemakers, smoke bombs and a few throwing knives for when it's you or them.

When it's time to kill, Basim lets his hidden blade do the talking, which I found to be a refreshing limitation that encourages honest-to-god sneaking over the series' old idea of stealth that usually amounted to 'shoot every guard you encounter with a gun or crossbow before they see you'.

I'm a big fan of *Mirage*'s streamlined gadgets. Each one serves a different purpose and can come in handy at make-or-break-stealth moments, but I particularly love the sleep darts. Sending a guard to snoozeville is a lot better than sticking a knife in their head because a guard that discovers a dead body goes on high alert, while a sleeping guard just wakes up and goes back to their normal route.

'High alert' is often an underwhelming punishment for sloppiness in stealth games when the AI just kinda pretends they're looking for you slightly harder than before, but *Mirage*'s guards really do step things up a notch. Alerted guards walk unpredictable routes, check hiding spots they'd usually ignore, and even learn how to look up.

For *Mirage*'s biggest story assassinations, Bordeaux goes the extra mile with 'black box' missions that offer a handful of different on-ramps to clean, cinematic kills similar to *Hitman*'s 'mission stories'. These missions are in much larger locations than the rest of the game, and usually involve Basim having to socially engineer a rendezvous with the target or, on a few occasions, don a disguise. Sometimes these moments were a little too hand-holdy for me, but the payoffs are cool. Black boxes aren't so grand and complex that I ever got the itch to replay them, but if I ever start a second playthrough I'd be curious to see how differently they can play out.

*Mirage* reimagines the series' social stealth offerings in clever ways, too: most compounds can be optionally infiltrated by blending into a crowd of concubines or a personal merchant escort. A heavily guarded front gate can be cleared by hiring mercenaries or tossing a coin to a nearby musician. In the old games, social solutions cost just a bit of in-game currency, but in *Mirage*, their services cost unique coins that can only be earned by completing side contracts for the relevant faction (merchants, scholars, mercenaries)

### NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**
A throwback to the stealthier days of *Assassin's Creed*

**EXPECT TO PAY**
£35

**DEVELOPER**
Ubisoft Bordeaux

**PUBLISHER**
Ubisoft

**REVIEWED ON**
Intel Core i9-9900KS, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Super

**MULTIPLAYER**
No

**LINK**
shorturl.at/qzAB3

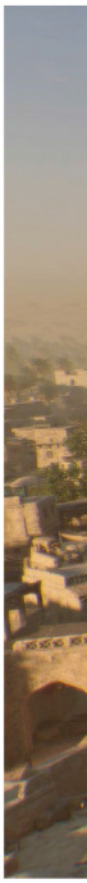
### ASSASSIN'S TOOLIT

*The key tools of Basim's trade*

**1 STEALTH**
Basim carries sleep darts, non-lethal traps, noisemakers, smoke bombs and a few throwing knives.

**2 SOCIAL**
Social currency can be used to buy an advantage, but the coins needed to do so must be earned.

**3 SWORD**
When Basim emerges from the shadows he has his trusty sword to parry guards' blows and finish them.



**ABOVE:** Basim legs it after dropping a particularly deadly fart.

**LEFT:** There are fewer collectables in *Mirage* than most *Assassin's Creed* games.

Strong bursting out of a pile of leaves energy.

**RIGHT:** Even deadly assassins need furry feline fun time.

**FAR RIGHT:** Basim, just hanging out. Get it! Grade A that is.

**BELOW:** Baghdad isn't huge, but its detail is very impressive.

or by pickpocketing, if you're lucky. More than ever before in 15 years of this series, I feel like an actual assassin in *Mirage*, not a gladiator.

## TAKE A STAB AT IT

Nowhere does that hold true more than when stealth finally breaks. *Mirage*'s combat is a strange reconstruction of the series' classic sword fighting – complete with a counter-kill that lets Basim instantly finish guards after a successful parry – with the same basic feel of *Valhalla*'s mushy group fights. It's functional, but also very ugly.

It doesn't matter as much as you'd expect that combat sucks, though, because I spent very little time using it. Basim is a glass cannon and goes down in a handful of hits, so I'd usually follow the loading screen's advice and run away if more than three guards surrounded me, or let them kill me and get a do-over from a generous checkpoint.

Parkour has experienced a similarly awkward transition from the *Valhalla* engine. It's great that you can't just Zelda your way up the face of any flat surface any more, and Bordeaux has captured some beautiful new parkour animations that help *Mirage* look like the old games. But it doesn't really feel like the old games.

Also, there is a 'go down' button in *Mirage*, but it only works if you're standing completely still and want to hang off a ledge. It also shares the same button with sneak mode, which led to constant unintentional crouches and more than a few bad words hurled at my monitor.

## THE ROUND CITY

The saving grace of *Mirage*'s parkour is Baghdad itself, which is so consistently gorgeous and alive that I never minded dropping onto the streets. Building facades are lavishly decorated with flowers, citizens carry on entire conversations as you shop for weapon upgrades and outfits (mostly in Arabic, even when playing in English), and markets are lined with ridiculously pretty rugs that I jealously want to spruce up my boring office.

I've never played a big-budget open-world game that's so clearly in love with the place it's depicting, and *Mirage*'s greatest showpiece of that love is its History of Baghdad codex: an encyclopaedia of dozens of collectible history bites spanning the region's economy, governments, and cultural contributions. The codex is surprisingly detailed, and the best touch are the photos of actual artefacts (pottery, scales, linens, artwork) of the time that even note the museum where you can go to see them for yourself.

**The saving grace of *Mirage*'s parkour is Baghdad itself**

I spent, at a conservative estimate, a quarter of my playtime hunting and devouring every single codex entry I could find. It's an impressive feat for Bordeaux, coming from someone who had to routinely fight off sleep in history class. I did not expect to play *Mirage* and come away thinking about how it used to be a job to visit market stalls and make sure vendors weren't weighing down their scales to scam customers.

Honestly, I wish *Mirage* was interested in its original story as much as the period it's set in. The opening hours do a nice job of introducing Basim and establishing the central mystery around the creepy djinni haunting his dreams (and maybe the Animus), but that thread is quickly sidelined once you're let loose in Baghdad.

It's weird how closely this game's story is tied to an otherwise unrelated game. You essentially need to play *Valhalla* (or watch an explainer) to understand what Basim's whole deal is – in other words, it plays out like an expansion instead of its own thing. *Assassin's Creed* is famous for its bad endings, but this one is up there.

## NO TIME WASTED

As promised, a *Mirage* playthrough will clock in around 20-25 hours. Even with a clear memory of when a 25-hour game was considered long, I can't help but feel like *Mirage* is a bit short. Its map is a little sparse for how big it is: if you're not pursuing a story mission or contract (which are just shorter story missions), there isn't much to do in the spaces between other than open chests, unlock codex entries and pickpocket collectibles.

It's making a lot more sense why Ubi decided to price *Mirage* at £35. I like that this is a focused adventure, and I think its distaste for open world bloat is an intentional move to separate it from the RPGs, but I admit that I actually miss some of that bloat, if only because *AC* used to do it pretty well.

Buying up property, collecting feathers and managing an assassin brotherhood were simple, fun distractions from the main story that added texture to Ezio's stomping grounds, and *Black Flag*'s sea shanties are still some of the best collectibles ever conceived. I really wanted more excuses to keep on playing as Basim and comb over every inch of Baghdad.

*Mirage* gets so close to great that it's annoying, but also encouraging. It may not be the complete return to form that I imagined, but it's the best stealth game to ever have the *Assassin's Creed* name on it, and I hope Ubisoft sees this new 'classic' branch of *AC* as something to build on. I'd love to see what Bordeaux could do with another chance – and hopefully more time to develop parkour, build another great city, and maybe rethink everything about combat. I'm excited about *Assassin's Creed* for the first time in a decade, and it feels good. ■

## BRILLIANT BAGHDAD

***The city is stunningly depicted in* Mirage**

**1 BUILDINGS** Building facades are lavishly decorated with flowers, art and patterned awnings.

**2 MARKETS** The city's many markets are lined with ridiculously pretty rugs, pots, outfits and more.

**3 HISTORY** Famous structures and people are evident through the city, and listed in a codex.

PC GAMER VERDICT

***Assassin's Creed Mirage*** **isn't the triumphant return to glory that I hoped it'd be, but it's a good first stab.**

**77**

Faction bonuses reflect a moral outlook you'll recognise from the books and movies.

**RIGHT:** Fremen skirmishers enter stealth mode under the light of the two moons.

**FAR RIGHT:** Strategically-placed agents grant intel points which you can then spend on covert operations.

**BELOW:** Guild-sponsored battleships, like the Kraken, are essential to taking down enemy bases.

# RIDERS ON THE WORM

## Arrakis proves an apt, if overly familiar, 4X setting in DUNE: SPICE WARS

*By Alexander Chatziioannou*

**Arrakis, Frank Herbert's inhospitable planet and the setting for *Dune: Spice Wars*, is arguably the most famous celestial body in science fiction. It sprang tailor-made for strategy gaming with its murderous terrain, political intrigue, and markedly differentiated factions vying for control of a priceless natural resource: the spice. That the foundations of the modern RTS were laid in Westwood's *Dune 2* was hardly a surprise.**

Like *Dune 2*, *Spice Wars* is an RTS, but it's also a 4X affair, and a remarkably traditional one at that. It lets you lead one of six rival groups locked in constant struggle over Arrakis' sandy expanse. Single scenarios and multiplayer battles are available, but the main draw is doubtless the 25-30 hour Conquest mode which unfolds over several missions, seeing me gradually tighten my grip on planetary domination.

Mission objectives vary, but progression follows a typical trajectory: first, I send out ornithopter scouts to locate spice fields close to the starting base and annex neighbouring villages to expand my borders. Then I start building essential infrastructure and researching new technologies. And, finally, I specialise in preparation for my current mission's endgame, whether that entails developing my espionage network so I can assassinate rival leaders, or acquire enough clout within the Landsraad Council to trigger a political victory.

These are resource-juggling loops even genre novices should be well-acquainted with, and *Dune: Spice Wars* does not particularly care about subverting or embellishing them. There's diplomatic manoeuvring with opposing Houses, regional bonuses to organise your industrial growth around, and an army to raise and train in case a desperate enemy makes a lunge for your spice fields. Barring a couple of nuances, my overall feeling was one of cosy familiarity within the first couple of hours – a state not inherently unpleasant but not terribly exciting, either. Consequently, I mostly ironmanned Conquest on the first go, only reloading when the game threw cheap curveballs at me, like a randomly aroused sandworm devouring half my army.

**Flaws started becoming apparent by the game's closing chapters**

The one concept that feels genuinely original is the CHOAM Market, a live stock exchange where each faction can purchase shares whose value is tied to spice production and whose acquisition might secure an economic victory. But even that innovation seems more indebted to the developers' single-minded focus on sticking close to Dune's literary and cinematic mythology rather than a desire to evolve the genre.

Indeed, almost every aspect of the game seems formulated toward mapping one-on-one correspondences with its inspiration's rich lore. The way water demands curtail early expansion; the hidden caves of the Fremen clans that can cause trouble for their enemies and turn the tide of war for allies; the moral outlook of each faction as reflected in their unique abilities.

### FEAR IS THE MIND-KILLER

Occasionally, these correspondences may result in something akin to inspiration, like the Fremen summoning sandworms to travel rapidly around the desert and execute surprise attacks. But mostly they serve as momentary flashes of recognition, a sort of, "Huh, it's smart how they incorporated that," around otherwise mundane mechanics.

Deeper flaws started becoming apparent by the game's closing chapters, namely the lack of a narrative hook to imbue the campaign with emotional resonance and an eminently exploitable economy. Purchasing building materials with Solari (the local currency) on an almost 1:1 ratio near the endgame, when the latter is plentiful and the former may be invaluable, is patently absurd.

*Dune: Spice Wars* is a faithful homage to its inspiration and a fine entry point for 4X newcomers, but there's not enough depth to engage genre veterans. I was happy to have conquered Arrakis, but it's unlikely I'll do it again anytime soon. ■

### NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**
A traditional take on the 4X set in Frank Herbert's fictional universe

**EXPECT TO PAY**
£29.50

**DEVELOPER**
Shiro Games

**PUBLISHER**
Funcom

**REVIEWED ON**
Intel Core i5-9600K, 16GB RAM, AMD Radeon 5700 XT

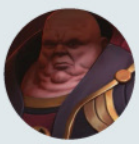
**MULTIPLAYER**
Yes

**LINK**
dunespicewars.com

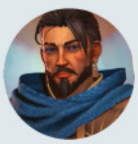
### UNRULY NEIGHBOURS

*The factions vying for control of Arrakis*

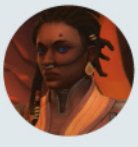
**HOUSE ATREIDES**
A benign breed of coloniser that can annex villages.



**HOUSE HARKONNEN**
Oppression does wonders for productivity.

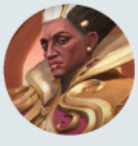


**THE SMUGGLERS**
An organisation that can infiltrate other factions' settlements.



**THE FREMEN**
Fierce natives whose unusual abilities include sandworm riding.

**HOUSE CORRINO**
The scions of the imperial line have inherited a knack for diplomacy.



**HOUSE ECAZ**
Seeks to gentrify the place. Serve them the White Lotus treatment.

**PC GAMER VERDICT**

*Dune: Spice Wars* is a solid entry-level 4X that fails to capture the spirit of its colourful setting.

**64**

# GROOVY

## WARGROOVE 2 is a familiar but filling all-you-can-eat strategy buffet

*By Dominic Tarason*

**The original *Wargroove* came at just the right time. The world had been starved of *Advance Wars*-style strategy for years, and Chucklefish's cheery fantasy reimagining of *War World*'s tanks n' choppers combat into knights and dragons hit the spot. More than four years later, *Wargroove 2* arrives on the scene, and while this sequel is better than ever, it perhaps struggles to stand out against the Switch revival of Nintendo's classic strategy series.**

For newcomers, *Wargroove* was a turn-based, kid-friendly fantasy strategy game that was heavily inspired by Intelligent Systems' classic *Advance Wars*. It had real strategic depth, with enough hard and soft counters to support dramatic comebacks and heroic pushes against the odds.

*Wargroove 2* is a huge second serving of that. Set a couple of years after the events of the original *Wargroove*, the sequel is split into five campaigns. One prologue/tutorial, then an escalation through three separate stories focused on ground, air and naval combat, culminating in a final stretch tying together all the mechanical and narrative threads the game has been building up to that point.

While the grand plot beats are mostly boilerplate fantasy, I was charmed by its cast of magical misfits. *Wargroove 2* knows when to break angst with a joke, or cut the laughs short with a sharp twist, especially so in the first campaign, which introduces the Faahri, a new faction of mouse-folk with little concept of war. Nervous rookie protagonist Lytra is fun, and mad scientist Pistil gets some memorable moments, but the game extracts the most drama from Rhomb, a hulking pacifist who grows increasingly distraught as conflict escalates.

There's a lot of game here, each campaign clocking in at six to ten hours depending on how aggressively you take each mission, and if you have to retry fights. Difficulty, thankfully, is no concern. While *Wargroove 2* defaults to 'hard', difficulty is very customisable, so even complete strategy beginners can enjoy the ride. And it's a fun ride, regardless of difficulty.

**Almost every battle feels distinct, and seldom repeats a trick twice**

### STRATEGY

The moment-to-moment strategy of *Wargroove 2* is barely changed from its predecessor. Every unit and commander from the first returns, joined by a few new options. Commanders now have a second level of 'Groove' and collectible items in the field can heal units or provide powerful buffs to non-commander units. But each addition is a multiplicative factor, opening up new strategies to be explored.

And explore it does. Almost every battle feels distinct, introducing new units, structures, gameplay twists almost every mission, and seldom repeats the same trick twice. There are even some non-combat missions where you get to wander, talk to characters and make dialogue choices. While the campaign doesn't branch, it explores a lot of what's possible with the game's pieces, but not everything.

Diving deeper into the really fringe possibilities of *Wargroove*, Conquest mode is the big new feature – a roguelike-inspired mode starting you with a handful of units and a single commander, facing bite-sized battles against small enemy formations. The problem is that there are very few opportunities to purchase new units or even repair damaged ones, so every fight becomes a puzzle-like dance of maximising damage while avoiding attrition, sometimes while dealing with poor unit match-ups, due to the randomly set scenarios.

It's clever, and fun, but also not why I enjoy *Wargroove*, with early mistakes easily compounding into a fail state. That said, this mode is an interesting new way to interact with *Wargroove 2*'s mechanics, with long-term progression to unlock new commanders and items.

Thankfully, the bigger battles that I prefer are well supported by the powerful campaign editor. While not high on originality, this is still an accessible popcorn strategy game, and a Steam Deck essential. A twice-crowned Burger King to *Advance Wars*' McDonald's might. ■

### NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**
Turn-based fantasy strategy inspired by *Advance Wars*

**EXPECT TO PAY**
£16.75

**DEVELOPER**
Chucklefish & Robotality

**PUBLISHER**
Chucklefish

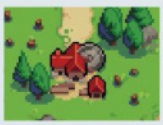
**REVIEWED ON**
Intel Core i9-13900k, 64BG RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4090

**MULTIPLAYER**
Local and online, co-op and PvP

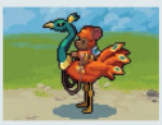
**LINK**
wargroove.com

### NEW RECRUITS

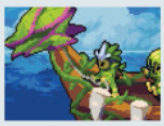
*Some of* **Wargroove 2's *new units***



**LUMBER MILL**
Each turn, it grows trees which can be used as cover, or harvested for a cash boost.



**AIR TROOPER**
The most mobile infantry unit in the game, capable of jumping over enemies.



**RIVERBOAT**
A naval unit capable of moving through narrow river tiles and capturing buildings inland.

**FROG**
Able to use its tongue to rescue endangered allies, or drag enemies into instant-death pits.

**KRAKEN**
If it can isolate an enemy vessel, it can do massive damage, or just grapple it to immobilise at range.

**PORTAL**
Essential in missions where they appear. If you control two portals, units can warp between them.

**PC GAMER VERDICT**

Bigger and more refined than its predecessor. Perhaps standing out a little less now, but with vast potential.

**81**

An unlikely alliance – outlaw children, a holy prince and their undead pals.

**FAR LEFT:** A rare moment between battles to slow down and chat with your squad.

**LEFT:** Some missions feature artefacts which can give regular grunts a huge boost.

There are 22 playable commanders, each with two charge levels on their Groove powers.

# BAD COMPANY

## THE LAMPLIGHTERS LEAGUE is tactically sound, but doesn't always perform

*By Jon Bailes*

**There are two types of people in this world, and you probably know which one you are. Real-time or turn-based – how do you like your tactics? Generations of gamers have placed themselves either side of this divide, as generations of games have served up one or the other. *The Lamplighters League*, though, hasn't quite made up its mind, or hopes it can bring us all together with its fusion of styles.**

Out in the field in this alternate 1930s adventure, you switch rhythms between the sneaky real-time techniques of *Commandos* or *Shadow Tactics*, and the turn-based percentage play of *XCOM*. It's a mashup we've seen previously in the work of developer The Bearded Ladies with *Mutant Year Zero*, and *Lamplighters* is as much indebted to that format as it is the disparate approaches of the aforementioned. It boils down to: the more guards you can remove silently in a mission, the less there are to worry about when things get loud.

Missions begin in stealth mode, with the trio (occasionally quartet) of combatants under your guidance using three class-based skills to knock out enemies on the sly. Sneaks can tip-toe up behind unsuspecting foes and bop them on the head; Bruisers charge in a straight line, potentially smashing multiple enemies at once; and Saboteurs lob an electricity trap that attracts a patrolling soldier. Get caught in enemy vision cones while executing such antics and turn-based play begins, or you can trigger it yourself whenever you're ready to stop beating about the bush.

Naturally, thinning the herd of hostiles in advance is a worthwhile endeavour, not least because it makes missions quicker. Yet unlike in *Mutant Year Zero*, it feels like more of an optional undertaking here, a shortcut rather than a necessity in order to stand a chance in open combat. In many cases, it's perfectly possible to face up full squads of goons as long as you pick your spot, perhaps waiting for enemy patrols to spread out a little so you can work them over in smaller groups.

**Thinning the herd of hostiles in advance is a worthwhile endeavour**

### XCON

As for the characters, while they all slot into those three stealth classes, in a stand-up fight they become more distinctive. No two are alike, in fact, with their own weapons, special moves and passive bonuses to play with. Take Ingrid and Lateef, for instance, the first pair you meet. The former beats foes into submission with weighted gloves, while the latter is a slippery thief whose pistol packs a more figurative punch.

With these and other characters *Lamplighters* shines brightly. Rather than generic military types, they're all criminals themselves, scratching a living from dodgy deals until a mysterious figure known as Locke offers the kind of cash they can't refuse to fight for his cause. Locke, it turns out, is the last surviving member of the titular organisation, sworn to stop a trio of shadowy evil folk from reaching some magic tower and taking over the world. Short of options, he's taken to hiring ne'er-do-wells to sabotage enemy operations.

This Saturday morning adventure serial vibe fits the premise snugly. Developer Harebrained Schemes plays smartly on some clichés – Ingrid may look like a typical femme fatale, but the only killing she does is with her fists – while holding onto others that can still be of service. Locations range from the kind of disused docks or seedy side streets that any decent noir detective would have to investigate, to secret bases in ancient ruins or jungles where you wouldn't be surprised to bump into Indiana Jones. There's ripe '30s flavour in the villains, too, or Scions as they're known in *Lamplighters* – a Lovecraftian occultist, a wealthy American industrialist, and an Aryan supremacist.

The real joy of the setup, though, remains in gathering your bunch of misfits and turning them into a crack fighting team. Once you've got your first three agents – Eddie, a sharpshooting war veteran, joins the initial pair – recruitment missions occasionally pop up where you make contact with a fellow outcast, who then either joins the roster of field agents or helps back at your island hideout with supplies and upgrades. It's there, between missions, that little dialogues play out, adding to the camaraderie of the crew while showcasing their backgrounds and motivations.

### RUN AND GUN

The turn-based combat serves to cement these relationships further, as each individual relies on their comrades' skills to survive. Your

### NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**
A grid tactics game set in a magic-infused 1930s that switches between real-time stealth and turn-based battles

**EXPECT TO PAY**
£45

**DEVELOPER**
Harebrained Schemes

**PUBLISHER**
Paradox Interactive

**REVIEWED ON**
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2070

**MULTIPLAYER**
No

**LINK**
paradoxinteractive.com

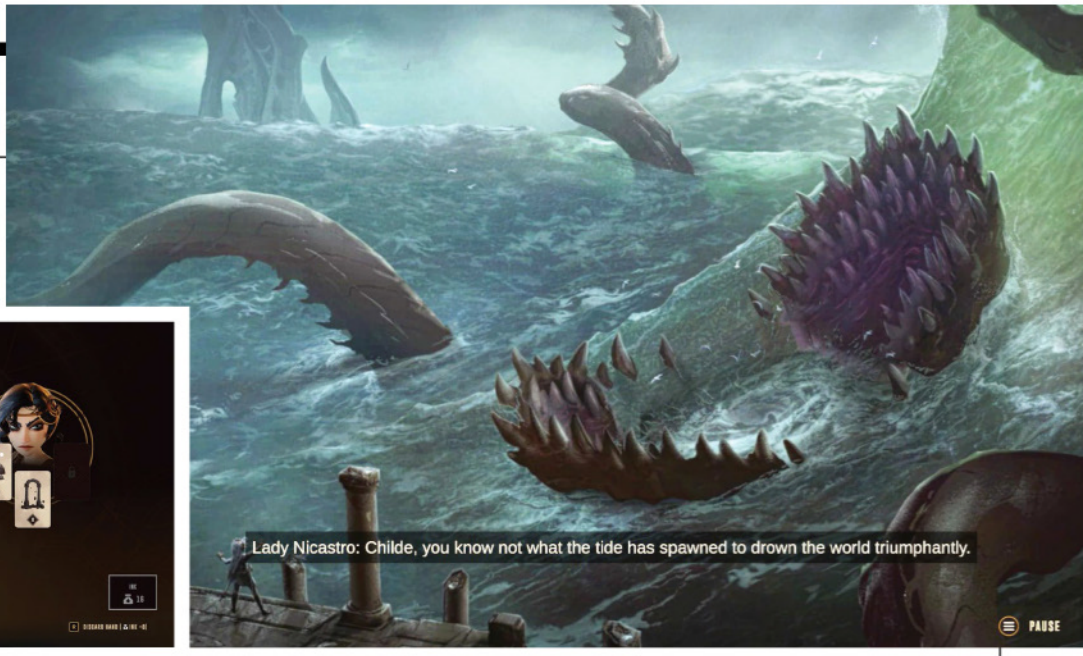
### WEIRD SCIONS

*These three ultimate villains have very unpleasant plans for the world*

**NICASTRO**
Comes from a long line of ne'er-do-wells and occult botherers. Hopes to raise the seas and bring up the Old Gods from the deep.

**MARTEAU**
The tech wizard of the bunch, he wants to turn the world into a giant factory, where billions of slaves produce his electric inventions.

**STRUM**
With the body of Schwarzenegger and the mind of Hitler, if he gets his way there'll be an army of fascists sweeping the globe.



**FAR LEFT:** Critical missions tend to take place in more interesting locations.

**BELOW:** These towers call in reinforcements a few turns after battle starts.

**FAR RIGHT:** Close up shots of your attacks reveal some very blurry graphics.

**BELOW:** Spill barrels of water or oil to spread electricity or fire damage.

chief consideration here is how to balance your long- and short-range game, since some characters are heavily melee oriented and others dedicated to firearms. For once, bringing a knife to a gun fight isn't necessarily a mistake, especially to get at enemies in cover. As long as you've got backup, that is, to provide overwatch and snipe off additional threats.

There's plenty besides to mull over, as *Lamplighters* adopts the two actions per turn system of *XCOM*, but rarely boils down to simple move and fire routines. It often feels unrestricted, beginning with the concession that an attack doesn't automatically end your turn, and offers means for characters to extend their turns or bank reactions before the enemy strikes back. Ingrid gets a do-over if she kills an enemy with her basic punch, for example, while the bullet-hungry Eddie can earn auto-reloads, and Lateef gains an evade bonus on moving that guarantees he'll dodge an attack in the opposition turn.

From there, skill upgrades enable synergies that can stack passive boons if used correctly, and once you add in a handful of status effects – mystical assassin Celestine can accelerate enemies' stress, forcing them to turn on their heels or on each other – there's almost something of the deck building game about *Lamplighters*' systems. Indeed, there is literal deck building of a kind, as each character can also equip up to three magical cards, awarded after battle, that bestow additional tricks and boosts.

## STOPPAGE TIME

As strange as it may seem to say it after all that, however, *Lamplighters* does have a major issue with repetition. For starters, the missions lack the personality of the characters – they're needlessly long and too alike in layouts and objectives. Whether you're out to contact a new recruit, shut down some nefarious machine, or steal a magical relic, you follow the same cycles, working your way to a designated point on the map and picking off whoever stands in the way. Generally there's an optional side objective too, but it's merely a detour before returning to the main task.

**Skill upgrades enable synergies that can stack passive boons**

This dearth of variation is doubly trying because you have to complete a lot of missions to finish *Lamplighters*, often returning to locations you've already seen. The game's structure roughly follows that of *XCOM 2*, with a world map offering a choice of missions that slow down one of three doomsday clocks tied to the Scions. In effect, you can't merely complete critical missions – of which there are 20 or so, including recruitment sorties – but have to keep delaying them for water-treading tasks purely to stop the clocks advancing. It lacks the hook of *XCOM 2*'s campaign, where every mission feels crucial.

True, your characters gradually level up after these time-consuming diversions, but then even though that helps combat to evolve, the stealth side of the equation remains curiously static. You always need to plan a little, deciding when to send an agent off alone to scope out an area and when to bunch your team together, but other than facing increasing numbers of enemies, it's the same question from first to last. Each class has one takedown skill and one navigation skill (climbing, lockpicking, breaking walls), but the map design never grows in complexity to make you ponder how best to use them.

## LEAGUES APART

There isn't much verticality in the game's locations either, which makes both stealth and combat rather two-dimensional, cover objects aside. Nor is there much destructible scenery, allowing you to, say, expose opponents with a well-placed grenade when they're bedded in. With such omissions, *Lamplighters* feels like a kind of *XCOM* light – an impression that only grows with unsophisticated AI that might tactfully be described as generous to a fault. Enemy soldiers will inexplicably turn down chances to shoot and jog away from the fight or straight into patches of fire.

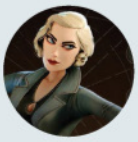
Even when one of the Scions visits the battlefield, it's surprisingly easy to isolate then overwhelm them before they get a chance to show off their skills. It may be forgiving, but where's the gratification in overcoming idiots?

Some of these limitations are likely technical, given that *Lamplighters* already struggles to maintain a decent frame rate. It's a somewhat glitchy experience overall, in fact, with a camera that fails to take account of scenery blocking its view when zooming in on attacks, and some muddy logic that can't help but rub you up the wrong way, not least in the transitions between real-time and turn-based modes. Kill the final enemy in a battle and it ends abruptly, with characters standing near fire or unexploded grenades likely to take damage before you resume control.

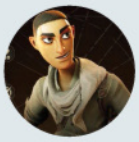
That's a shame as *Lamplighters* mostly manages its turn-based and real-time dichotomy quite neatly. Its problems aren't in the core concept, but in placing breadth over depth, content over refinement, which leaves both turn-based and real-time elements lacking the staying power of their more dedicated inspirations. In trying to offer something for everyone, The *Lamplighters* might not fully satisfy anyone at all. ■

## DIRTY HALF-DOZEN

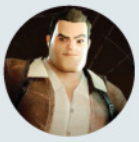
***Some of the scoundrels you'll have to manage***



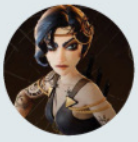
**INGRID**
A hard hitter, her signature move is sweeping enemies off their feet.



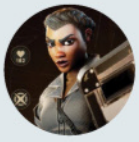
**LATEEF**
Calls himself the gentleman Djinn. Lays a decoy and turns invisible.



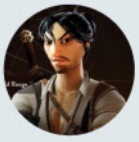
**EDDIE**
With itchy trigger fingers, his party trick is blasting multiple targets.



**CELESTINE**
An assassin with a poison dagger and the power to hypnotise an enemy.



**JUDITH**
She can rack up armour points and act as a damage magnet.



**JIANYI**
Combines gun and sword to shoot from afar then teleport in close for a strike.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Fun characters with unique tactical skills are let down by repetition and some technical shortcomings.

**62**

**ABOVE:** The AI will always try different lines, even at Suzuka's S-curves.

**FAR RIGHT:** Cockpit cam is as full of detail as it is hard to drive.

**BELOW:** Staples like Spa are present, but the track list feels light.

# CONSERVATIVE STRATEGY

## FORZA MOTORSPORT takes few risks, but snatches simcade supremacy anyway

*By Phil Iwaniuk*

**There's one lap to go at Laguna Seca, an angry, bucking beast of a circuit in the California desert where I've so far been shepherding a Civic to a bang-average fourth place finish. But this is *Forza* multiplayer: it's not over until the penalties are counted, the 'mute all' button is pressed and the chequered flag is taken. The leader has a problem: as they head into the infamous corkscrew chicane, they're side-by-side with P2 in the braking zone.**

I can see on the minimap that this does not go well for either party. They're both off track, and one of them clatters into P3 upon rejoining the track. I'm about to win the race. Except I don't. I take those last corners so cautiously that one of the stricken corkscrew victims pulls back to within 1.2 seconds of me – and I'm carrying 1.2 seconds of penalties for corner cutting. I cross the line first, and finish second.

The lesson here is that victory is decided by fine margins. That's as true in lowercase 'm' motorsport as it is in *Forza Motorsport*, which for all its considerable qualities and resources just manages to grab hold of excellence despite both technical and conceptual issues.

By which I mean this: the handling's absolutely wonderful, like we knew it would be. Its vehicles genuinely are better than we've seen in driving games before, and circuits are so high in fidelity now it's almost a shame to have to take them in at speed. But Turn 10 plays too safe with those valuable assets in *FM*'s singleplayer career mode, arranging them into a stack of the usual racing series categories to tick off in a career just like a *Gran Turismo* or a *Grid* might. Luckily, online racing elevates the whole experience.

There's a newfound sense of weight to *FM*'s cars. They let you know exactly how much their tyres are complaining against the G-forces you're putting through the platform, with much more precise detail than 2017's *Forza Motorsport 7* did. There's some of *Forza Horizon*'s character deep within *Motorsport*, but it's much more rigorous, closer to the venerable *Gran Turismo* in its simulation level.

**The handling's absolutely wonderful, like we knew it would be**

The caveat is that I've had several crashes to desktop just before both online races and offline series events. Having raised these issues with the developer, PCG understands that the multiplayer crashes were a known bug and subsequently patched, and my offline crashes are now also being worked on in a forthcoming update.

### NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**
The closest PC gaming has to *Gran Turismo*, now even shinier

**EXPECT TO PAY**
£70

**DEVELOPER**
Turn 10 Studios

**PUBLISHER**
Microsoft

**REVIEWED ON**
Intel Core i7 9700K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 TI

**MULTIPLAYER**
Yes

**LINK**
xbox.com/en-GB/games/forza-motorsport

### WILD THINGS

*Four cars that hate you and your inputs*

**1966 MCLAREN M2B**
Fearsome, roaring engine power, from the days before they invented grip.

**2020 KOENIGSEGG JESKO**
It's all fun and games until you need to steer. Looks alright though doesn't it?

**#66 CHAPARRAL CARS 2E**
To cough while holding the steering wheel of this thing is to enter a drift.

**DODGE VIPER SRT10 ACR**
A fighter jet on four wheels. Well, until you stack it into a wall, then there's three.

I've been able to forgive these crashes because in singleplayer they haven't amounted to much lost progress – and because of how *Forza Motorsport*'s cars feel. If the fundamentals are this good, then, does it matter if the career mode is driving by numbers through a bunch of over-familiar mini-championships?

### RACE DAY

Solo racing does have a handful of worthwhile new additions like smarter AI drivers and a grid selection mechanic that gives you more credits for a podium finish the further back you start from. But it's online where things all come together, where the handling, the car upgrade system and the race format all culminate in something special.

The custom lobby creation tools are strong – on a par with *Assetto Corsa* and *Project CARS 2* when it comes to dialling in weather, time of day, rules and regulations. And the official multiplayer series impose vehicle restrictions to get you thinking, and tuning, your way to P1. Whenever I get into an online race, that contest is invariably packed with drama, tactical depth and surprisingly sporting racing.

I wish Turn 10 had rolled the dice in a few more areas here, but nonetheless I can't help but admire the safe but finely crafted sim it's built. *Forza Motorsport* is missing that one great idea that moves the genre forwards, like *The Crew Motorfest*'s Grand Races. Its singleplayer is overly familiar, but with a car collection this voluminous and vehicle and track fidelity levels to make even Kaz Yamauchi nod, you can play it safe and still stand on the top step of the podium. ■

**PC GAMER VERDICT**

***Forza Motorsport* is as polished as driving sims have ever been on PC. Stately and familiar, but finely crafted.**

**80**

# DEATH ON THE NILE

## TOTAL WAR: PHARAOH is the first historical Total War in ages

*By Rick Lane*

**T*otal War: Pharaoh* isn't the best *Total War* game, but it is possibly the one I'm most impressed by. Creative Assembly's chosen setting sits right on the precipice of military history. The Battle of Kadesh, which took place about 100 years before *Total War: Pharaoh* begins, is the earliest pitched battle that we have records of tactics and formations for. The most technologically advanced weapon of the time was the chariot.**

Compared to the military engine that powered Rome, or the wild armies of *Total War: Warhammer*, *Pharaoh* has precious few tools to create an entertaining simulation of warfare. And yet, *Pharaoh* is a deeply compelling strategy game. Although its battles are almost *Shogun*-like in their simplicity, the campaign is anything but, offering a fiercely challenging scramble for power over an empire that is falling apart at the seams.

### PRINCE OF EGYPT

*Pharaoh* takes place shortly after Ramesses II has begun the long journey to becoming two vast and trunkless legs of stone, and the power gap that opened after his unprecedented reign. Playing as either an Egyptian, Canaanite, or Hittite general, your goal is to conquer enough of the land around the Eastern Mediterranean.

In this, becoming pharoah is merely the start of your aspirations, rather than the end goal. Around turn 12 of the campaign, you unlock a new system known as Power of the Crown. This lets you choose to follow the path of becoming either the Egyptian Pharaoh or the Great King of Hatti. These positions come with benefits, but they're attained in the same way – winning a civil war.

**You might get usurped, then claim the throne back**

Unlike the original *Rome*, in which the civil war was deployed as a narrative third-act twist, civil wars in *Pharaoh* are more systemic and can happen at any time. You can start them yourself, or they might be triggered by an AI faction, whereupon you can choose whether to participate. If you do, your name is added to a league table of pretenders. From there, you have a set number of turns to reach the top by earning Legitimacy – a political resource acquired by winning battles, taking land and engaging in courtly intrigue.

The impact this system has is significant. For starters, it makes *Total War*'s early game more immediately engaging, as you can have a crack at becoming pharaoh as soon as turn 12. It also means progression isn't necessarily a gradual, one-way accrual of power. You might become pharaoh early on, but then you'll need to maintain that position, fighting off other pretenders to your throne. You might get usurped, then claim the throne back.

Even if you're way off becoming pharaoh, you can still wield power in a more limited fashion. The pharaoh holds a court with several illustrious positions, such as viceroy of Kush, grand vizier and first commander. Each of these positions comes with its own benefits. The viceroy, for example, gets an annual salary paid in

### NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**
Grand historical strategy set in Ancient Egypt

**EXPECT TO PAY**
£50

**DEVELOPER**
Creative Assembly

**PUBLISHER**
Sega

**REVIEWED ON**
AMD Ryzen 5 3600, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Super

**MULTIPLAYER**
Yes

**LINK**
pharaoh.totalwar.com

**ABOVE:** *Pharaoh*'s unit roster isn't the most spectacular, but the chariots are cool.

The battle maps get an impressive amount of variety out of Egypt's deserts.

**TOP:** The campaign has a lot to take in, which can make getting started tricky.

**FAR RIGHT:** Autoresolved battles are accompanied by a neat duelling animation between your two generals.

gold, while the vizier can assassinate other court members. You can curry favour with the present holders of these positions to make use of their powers, or you conspire to take advantage of them in other ways, blackmailing them for additional favours, discrediting them to damage their legitimacy, or forcing them to vacate their position entirely, perhaps so you can assume it yourself.

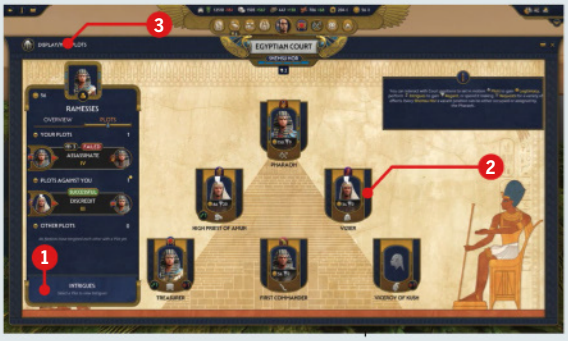
This system is nothing like as involved as *Crusader Kings*' elaborate political simulation, but it is fun to noodle around with, and can tie into the broader game in some interesting ways. If you're in a civil war, for example, then successfully discrediting a rival might help you leapfrog them up the league table, damaging their Legitimacy while adding to your own.

## TEN PLAGUES

Should you succeed in becoming pharaoh, your problems will be far from over, as you'll inherit an empire at the end of its golden age. Things aren't too bad at the game's outset, which is good because you'll be busy acquainting yourself with *Pharaoh*'s surprisingly complex economy system. There are five resources in the game: food, wood, stone, bronze and gold. Food and bronze are crucial for maintaining armies, wood and stone for constructing buildings, while gold plays a role in pretty much everything.

## PYRAMID SCHEMES

### *Court systems grant power*




**1 POSITION** There are five positions beneath the pharaoh, each with benefits.

**2 ACTION** You can interact with each court notary, performing intrigues to gain favour.

**3 TIMELINE** The amount of time you have until the next harvest, when all plots reach their end.

**TOP:** Found 'em.

**FAR LEFT:** There's some fantastic detail in the battle animations.

Simply getting hold of all these resources can be tricky. Gold and bronze deposits are scarce on the map, while stone has a hard limit on how much you can mine across the entire game. This makes trading and bartering more vital than in any other *Total War*. But it gets harder as the game goes on, because soon enough your empire will start to collapse. The sanctity of Egypt and Hatti is founded upon numerous institutional structures named Cult Centres, and as civil war begins to damage those centres, the game world will descend into crisis. At this point, the colour palette of the map visibly changes, and you'll start to be harassed by invaders from across the Mediterranean. Not just one or two boats either. Entire fleets will cruise down the arteries of the Nile delta, striking at both the head and heart of Egypt. These raiders cause more destruction, further destabilising the foundations of civilisation.

Fighting these different fires, all while trying to forge a legacy of your own, is a formidable challenge. Simply maintaining a decent-sized army requires you to solve a whole bunch of logistical problems. Luckily, you can often mitigate some of the upkeep cost by building different kinds of outposts. These are subsidiary buildings that orbit your main city, ranging from temples that increase your favour with the gods, to forts where you can garrison your

## LEGACY BUILD

*Choose a legacy for your empire*

**THUTMOSE THE CONQUEROR**
Provides handy additional abilities for seizing cities. Beards +5, too.

**HATSHEPSUT THE MERCHANT**
Enables you to dispatch trade caravans to distant lands for profit.

**AKHENATEN THE HERETIC**
Lets you create your own god, then worship them to gain further powers.

**KHUFU THE BUILDER**
Empowers you to construct ancient wonders to boost Legitimacy.

forces at a discount. Alongside the passive bonuses outposts provide, armies can also interact with them for temporary boons. Indeed, planning your outposts carefully can yield substantial rewards, letting your armies cross vast swathes of the map, and making them cheaper and stronger in the process.

## CHARIOTS ON FIRE

In short, Creative Assembly has built a sumptuous, diverse and thematic campaign. There's a whole bunch of other stuff I haven't mentioned, like how praying to different gods can provide different bonuses, and the victory condition-like Ancient Legacies that can spur you on your way to winning. But we should spend some time on the battles, as this is where *Pharaoh*'s weakspot lies.

To be clear, *Pharaoh*'s battles are not bad. They are classic *Total War* affairs that combine robust tactical foundations with brutal physicality. Walls of infantry crashing into one another, arrow hailstorms thudding into the sand, chariot charges sending foot-soldiers flying. Zoom in on the action, and you can even hear the crude maces of Egyptian chargers thudding into the skulls of their enemies. And of course, your battles are taking place beneath the shadows of pyramids that are already ancient. Cool.

*Pharaoh* also does what it can to add some new ideas into the mix. Weather conditions are more diverse and dynamic. Being largely a desert country, Egypt's weather is less rain and fog, and more sweltering heat and choking dust storms. These can be used to your advantage in some interesting ways. In one defensive battle where I was outnumbered, I positioned my army as deep into the desert as I could, high up on the scorching dunes. By the time the enemy reached me, their troops were exhausted from the heat, and I was able to mop up their ragged lines with minimal effort, turning a potential defeat into an easy victory.

Ultimately though, there is only so much Creative Assembly can do to spice up the ranks of such an ancient civilisation. There are many faction-specific types of swordsmen, axemen, spearmen, chariots etc. But units are all slight variations on these categories. After controlling the wildly imaginative factions of *Warhammer*, and the pseudo-magical armies of *Three Kingdoms*, going back to slings and arrows is inevitably a bit deflating, especially when the contrast is as harsh as this.

**The game's generals are sorely lacking in character**

There isn't a whole lot Creative Assembly can do about this without throwing history out of the window. But there are some other issues that nag at the game. Getting a decent foothold in *Pharaoh*'s campaign is tricky. This is partly because there are so many different systems to account for, including ones I haven't mentioned like attrition, which will decimate your forces if they stray off the road in desert environments. But also, defending cities have even more advantages than they did in earlier *Total War* games. On top of the city garrison and whatever army might be inside, they can also call in reinforcements from any outpost garrisons. This means you may have to besiege the outpost before you can besiege the city, which is arduous.

The other issue is that the game's generals are sorely lacking in character. In its broader strokes, *Pharaoh* is wonderfully evocative of its era. The campaign map is beautifully detailed, while the entire game is steeped in the culture and traditions of ancient Egypt. But the game's central belligerents are dead behind the eyes. They have none of the personality of *Three Kingdoms*' colourful generals, dampening the drama created by civil wars.

All things considered though, *Total War: Pharaoh* is a success. This is a much harder setting to make work in *Total War*'s context than more familiar locales like Rome or feudal Japan. The battles may be the simplest they've been in a long time, but they still have that *Total War* magic, and Creative Assembly has built an evocative and exciting campaign around them. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

**Battles may be limited by history, but Creative Assembly compensates for this with a complex and dynamic campaign.**

**80**

**ABOVE:** Well, you did pray for rain...

The game has some impressive city maps.

# OLD HORIZONS

## MINEKO'S NIGHT MARKET struggles to innovate on well-trodden ground

*By Kaile Hultner*

**I don't dream of labour. My thoughts aren't filled with get-rich-quick schemes, I have never developed a 'grindset' and my browser history is free from searches on "how to start an LLC". I may have to work for the things in this world I love most, but I will never pray to my job as though it were a god. In *Mineko's Night Market*, there's an actual god of commerce, and it's a giant cat who lives in your shed.**

As Meowza Games' first outing, *Mineko's Night Market* is a very cute and soft business management sim that kind of just papers over the fact that we're making a young girl economically revitalise a whole town by selling crafts to neighbours. The writing is quirky, the setting is appropriately rural while still vaguely gesturing at modern trends, the art is this kind of pop-up picture book-ish style that feels just a little derivative while still managing to do the job it was meant to do.

Unfortunately, there's a serious tension between the game's various systems – namely its wildly inflated economy, tedious central loop and the mechanics of fulfilling quests – and its story, and it's a tension that is never fully resolved.

*Mineko's Night Market* is a game that is grounded in myths that are both ancient and exceedingly modern. On the one hand, it makes gestures at various aspects of traditional Japanese folklore, like the Maneki-neko or Ebisu and the Seven Gods of Fortune. The game's resident feline deity, Nikko, has shrines and statues in its image all over Mt Fugu Island, in various states of disrepair. Its iconography can especially be found all over the village; all the villagers believe in Nikko as a real entity, and there's even a government agency that seems to be hunting it. The game's A-plot is focused on this folklore and eventually on protecting Nikko from those agents.

On the other hand, this is a game about capitalism, or rather, a very particular set of ideas about how capitalism ideally should work. The titular Night Market, a cross between a weekly cultural festival and swap meet, sits at the heart of this set of ideas, and our participation in it – making items to sell, participating in its special events, even attracting new vendors – seems like it's the engine that makes the rest of the town more prosperous again. The B-plot is very concerned with us making enough tchotchkes to bring the village back to life.

**There's a serious tension between the game's various systems**

### BOOM AND BUST

One of the key facets of any small business simulator is that you have to balance your costs – time, labour, actual money spent – against your revenue. Even so, the economy in Mineko is seriously skewed. Stamina-replenishing items like cup ramen and sushi boxes cost upwards of $80. Basic tools like hand axes and fishing rods cost as much as a scalped PlayStation 5. More advanced tools, like specialised workbenches we earn for progressing, cost even more.

The best way to make money so that you can afford these items and move the story forward is to sell crafted items at the Night Market, so the majority of your week is spent wandering around the areas you've unlocked, picking up crafting materials. Doing so costs stamina and running out means you can't collect any more that day. Eating and drinking can replenish stamina, but to start with you can only consume three food or drink items per day. Even if this wasn't a factor, you can only seemingly visit two locations per day before the bus shuts down. This gameplay loop reigns supreme, even when new elements are added.

I really wanted to like *Mineko's Night Market*. The game is cute enough and low-stakes enough that some – though not all – of its issues could probably be ignored. My own personal ideological bugbears aside, I genuinely think I would have preferred a version of this game that just leaned into the business sim stuff and eschewed the story altogether. Or, I think I'd be happy with the game focusing on its story and making some of the roadblocks in the business sim design less prominent: no stamina meter, tools costing less, a less-byzantine quest structure. *Mineko's Night Market* wants to have the best of both worlds, and I think it gets in its own way as a result. ■

### NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**
A free market cat-pitalism simulator set in an alternate-reality Japanese island

**EXPECT TO PAY**
£16

**DEVELOPER**
Meowza Games

**PUBLISHER**
Humble Games

**REVIEWED ON**
AMD Aerith 0405, 16GB RAM, AMD Van Gogh 0405 (Steam Deck 256GB); AMD Ryzen 5 3500U, 12GB RAM, Radeon Vega Mobile Graphics

**MULTIPLAYER**
No

**LINK**
minekosmarket.com

### THE ANATOMY OF NIKKO

*Mt Fugu's prosperity god*

**1 MASK** Helps keep Nikko's identity as a giant Japanese Bobtail a secret.

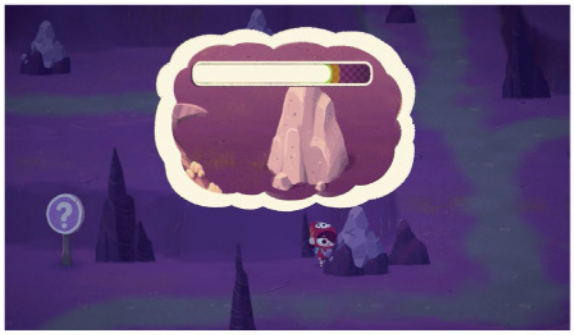
**2 COIN COLLAR** Instead of holding a koban coin as Maneki-neko are often depicted, he wears his coin around his neck.

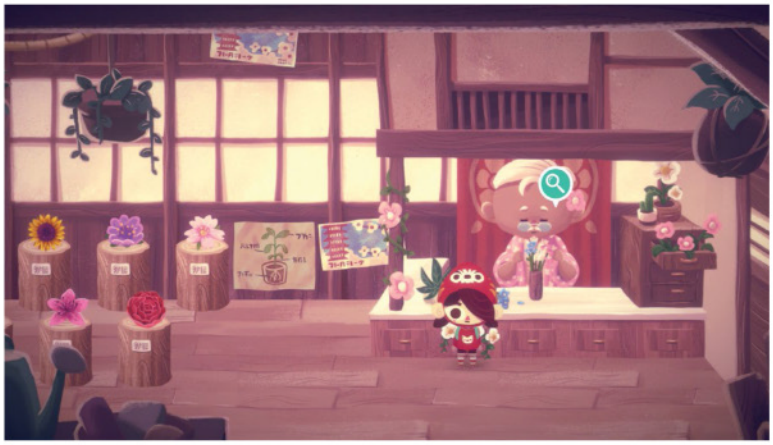
**3 SPIRAL PATTERN ON TUMMY** Where all the economic fortune comes from.

**PC GAMER VERDICT**

With muddled gameplay and conflicted writing, *Mineko's Night Market* can't decide on an identity to fully embrace.

**62**



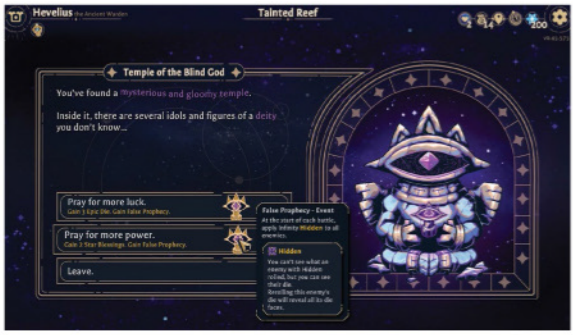


**FAR LEFT:** Some of the junk you collect belongs in a museum.

**LEFT:** For $80 this sushi better kiss me goodnight.

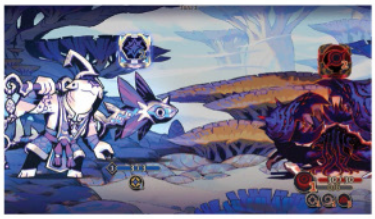
**BELOW:** The kids you meet might be weird...

Ah, Austra, my favourite. Head empty, only luck. At least until you can skew the odds.




**RIGHT:** I've still yet to master big shark-monk Cellarius. Even his basic attacks cause self-damage.

**BELOW:** More dice = more options. But there are limits to that sort of power.



Who needs strategy? Roll a die, then flip a coin and find out if you win!

# NO WHAMMIES

## ASTREA: SIX-SIDED ORACLES raises the deckbuilder stakes with gambling tension

*By Dominic Tarason*

**I'm no risk-taker (or so I like to tell myself), and yet I have spent the past few days making extremely poor decisions with dice. Fortunately my errors in judgment haven't bankrupted me, but they sure have led a long procession of adorable cartoon critter-folk to their cosmic doom. *Astrea: Six-Sided Oracles*, the debut game from Brazilian studio Little Leo Games, is an experimental take on the deckbuilding roguelike that might just make a gambler out of me.**

Aesthetically *Astrea* makes a strong first impression. Set in a dreamlike watercolour world of astral mages and eldritch corruption, there's an assortment of cute animal-people to play as, including well-dressed sharks, bees and robot crocodiles clad in swish robes, battling against 'corrupted' versions of their kith and kin.

*Astrea*'s structure is nigh-identical to deckbuilding trailblazer *Slay The Spire*, but makes the moment-to-moment combat a very different experience by trading cards for dice. Each of six playable characters has a radically different gimmick and set of dice to pick as rewards for progressing across the branching campaign map.

Dice are broadly split into three categories: Safe (all six sides are likely positive, if minor in their effect), balanced (three or four sides are good, with some risks) and risky (two or three sides are positive, but can be incredibly powerful). It makes for an exciting dynamic, pushing me to take risks but also plan enough to reduce the chances of destroying myself. While the dice may not have fancy card art, they feel mechanically and thematically distinct, and rolling them is always fun.

Each individual die face has a huge assortment of possible powers, from basic damage or healing to complex interactions involving stacking debuffs, resource burning and even time-bending shenanigans. The complexity here is compounded by the unusual but exciting way *Astrea* handles health. While enemies can have health pools stretching into the hundreds, you'll never have more than seven, and damage is frequently unavoidable. Within a single turn before enemies have even acted, I sometimes found myself swinging between one and seven health several times.

**Hinges on an ingenious system called Virtues**

### SLAY THE TRAIN

*Astrea* hinges on an ingenious system called Virtues, abilities intrinsic to each character that become usable as you take Corruption damage. These abilities can sometimes drag you out of trouble (most characters have a 'reroll' virtue usable on any dice, including enemies), but they're a reliable way of dealing damage, meaning that you'll be walloping yourself with a nasty die, firing off your Virtues, and healing back before the opponent has time to act. If you planned right. If not, you can end up being knocked over by a small breeze, or just plain blowing yourself up.

It's always a tense tightrope walk, and it creates a thrillingly 'swingy' game where things go wrong instantaneously if you don't plan two moves ahead. The saving grace is that most characters have three lives, preventing a single miscalculation from spoiling a run. But those lives can be wagered for permanent upgrades, another temptation I found turning me into a gambler.

The result is a deckbuilder in which almost every single turn is engaging and often butt-clenching. Good strategy and tactics got me 70% of the way there, but 30% of it was luck and gut feeling. Much like *Slay the Spire*, each run has you building up a deck of tools and artefacts that tend to hint towards a specific playstyle, but each character has enough gimmicks available to make multiple approaches viable. More exotic dice unlock without diluting the flavour of each hero.

While I've had a great time with *Astrea*, I often found getting a run off the ground frustrating, with too many attempts flummoxed by a few bad rolls during the opening fights. Easy come, easy go is the nature of gambling, and levelling up your character does open up some extra setup options. But I often felt things get easier towards the end, rather than harder – not the ideal challenge curve in a deckbuilder. ■

### NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**
A dicey deckbuilder with an astral magic theme

**EXPECT TO PAY**
£21

**DEVELOPER**
Little Leo Games

**PUBLISHER**
Akupara Games

**REVIEWED ON**
Intel Core i9-13900k, 64GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4090

**MULTIPLAYER**
None

**LINK**
akuparagames.com/game/astrea-six-sided-oracles

### CORRUPTION AND YOU

**Astrea's *health bar & Virtues explained***

**1 YOUR HEALTH**
Seven points. No more, no less. So when a boss is about to drop 14 corruption damage on you when it takes its turn, you'd better come up with a plan.

**2 YOUR VIRTUES**
Aside from the one at the far right, these abilities require you to take Corruption damage before they activate, but they're key to most characters.

**3 YOUR HEARTS**
Start a run with three, and they're restocked after beating a boss. Run out of health, you lose one and heal to full. Unless you gambled them away.

**PC GAMER VERDICT**

Despite a capricious early game, *Astrea* is a refreshing and tense spin on the tried-and-true deckbuilder.

**80**

**NEED TO KNOW**

| EXPECT TO PAY | DEVELOPER | LINK |
|---|---|---|
| Free | Sirius Lemaitre, Léonard Lemaitre | bit.ly/Babbdi |

The trumpet is the best toy. You can even change key with the mousewheel.

# SLIDES RULE

## Revisiting BABBDI to find a city generous with exploration

**What defines an immersive sim? Is it the multiple approaches, the vent-crawling, the exploration? No, it's even simpler than that – it's the sliding. Like most immersive sims, *Babbdi* lets you slide into a crouched position. It's a movement that's fun to perform – and movement is at the heart of *Babbdi*.**

It's never been such fun to move around such a dismal location. Imagine *Crackdown* in a UK tower block: a game of puzzling your way up, down and around a concrete playground on a foggy day. The combat and stealth of the classic immersive sims have been jettisoned entirely, and all that's left is the exploration and a goal to achieve by a variety of means: get the hell out. Secure a train ticket and flee this brutalist city.

But first: stick your nose into every concrete nook and cranny. You'll find interesting items and characters hidden in hard-to-reach places. People making the best of their dreary lives, while uttering a cryptic line of dialogue. It's particularly exciting when you find a new item – you can 'wield' one at a time, a tough choice – and immediately click the mouse button to see what it does. With the torch, you can explore unlit areas. With the bike, you can zoom about like a legend. With the trumpet, you can serenade the unimpressed NPCs. Not everything is useful, but everything is essential. What would a sandbox be without a bucket and spade?

Even better are the exploration aids, like the vacuum cleaner that lets you hover in the air. At the top of the city you'll find a reward that lets you fully unlock it.

The atmosphere is bleak, enjoyably so. But these tower blocks are really toy blocks – and what fun to play with. ■

**85**

# DIGITAL MONSTERS

## Dusting off the cute digital pets of CYBERPET GRAVEYARD

**To an obsessive tidier, *Cyberpet Graveyard* is kind of a hellish game, as it summons mischievous digital pets onto your desktop. Each critter is a separate program, and they do things like create files and move them around. For a certain kind of person (hello!) they're about as welcome as a virus.**

That I find them cute anyway – that I'm smiling as I chase this critter around, in a moving window that's spewing out miniature windows – says a lot about the extraordinary *Cyberpet Graveyard*.

Is it a game? Mainly it's a folder filled with images, and videos, and the digital pets themselves: little animated apps that bounce infectiously around your computer screen. The clown-like Hopson blows out kisses and looks terribly sad when you drag them around. Meanwhile, Louie likes to play on the goddamn taskbar. I'm trying to write this now as they shuffle about, and I'm being told off every time I try to move them. Closing the window feels a little like taking the batteries out of a living Tamagotchi.

There's a meta story told via email snapshots, and countless folders filled with supplementary material, but the thing that holds it all together is its endearingly hyperactive personality.

This is a loud, colourful game with a slightly dark sense of humour and a jittery energy I can relate to all too well. It's as if a regular game wouldn't be able to contain all these ideas, all this creativity.

And when it comes to the pets themselves, these are virtual beings that really have some fun with the desktop environment. The pixel-art monsters are certainly annoying, but bursting with character. ■

**90**

The game is comprised of loads of folders, each stuffed with applications and images.

**NEED TO KNOW**

| EXPECT TO PAY | DEVELOPER | LINK |
|---|---|---|
| Free | Nathalie Lawhead | bit.ly/Cyberpet |

**BELOW:** The pink paw is you. Dodge the raindrops and run right to the exit.

# DRIZZLE KICKS

## RAINDROP is still an innovative indie arcade game

**I often think about *Raindrop*, a tiny arcade-style game made by indie developer Shuhei Miyazawa. It's such an innovative game – though, in an unpopular genre, it seems to have passed people by. I'm grateful for this opportunity to return to it, and bring this cat-in-the-rain saga to more people's attentions.**

The gist is that you're a cat, and you're trying to cross the street in torrential rain. Dodge the raindrops as they fall and collect as many stars as you can, for a bonus. Every time you reach the exit your score is banked. Do you rush repeatedly to each exit until you're finally hit by a raindrop? Or do you linger in each stage, dodging rain and catching stars to increase your combos?

I can't think of another arcade game that lets you meaningfully choose how you want to improve your score – it's usually a matter of maximising every opportunity until you achieve perfection. *Raindrop*, however, is a game with a handful of different approaches, which you'll need to experiment to find. Have you noticed the little jingly noise that plays when a raindrop gets too close for comfort? Yep, that's another way to score: by playing daredevil and narrowly dodging rain as it drips down.

You discover each bonus by playing around, much like the cat playing in the rain, eventually earning a badge at the bottom of the screen that makes it official. Mix and match approaches – beat stages quickly while grazing raindrops, perhaps – or pick one and see how far you can make it. The only thing that matters is how much you score. ■

**87**

**NEED TO KNOW**

| EXPECT TO PAY | DEVELOPER | LINK |
|---|---|---|
| Free | Shuhei Miyazawa | bit.ly/RaindropGame |

# SPECTACULAR

## Another look at the ambitious, freeform SPECTACLE

***Spectacle* is aptly named – it's a visually resplendent throwback to a bygone age. Evoking games like *Shadowgate* and *Uninvited*, it's a first-person adventure where half of the fun is stumbling into deadly encounters. Perhaps I shouldn't linger by that giant snake, much as I'm curious. Cue hilarious game-over screen.**

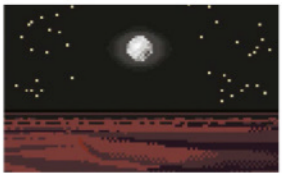
Today, these sudden deaths are seen as outdated design – and rightly so, when we have to return to a previous save. But *Spectacle* just reverts things to before the encounter. You get all the fun of the custom death, then carry on with your puzzling business as if it never happened. That's really the only modern concession in a game built on the shoulders of those old 'Macventure' games. However, with modern hardware comes the power to dream a little bigger.

This is still a game of exploring screen-by-screen, as you roam a gorgeous fantasy realm inspired by Middle Eastern mythology. Ultimately, you're trying to escape the place, although that will involve solving genuinely difficult puzzles across a large, interconnected world. We're trusted to figure things out for ourselves, in a game that practically demands the use of a notepad and pen. There's a scale here that the developers of the Macventure games could have only dreamed of.

There is also – and I forgot this until playing *Spectacle* again – a day-night cycle, meaning developer Grahfmetal had to draw multiple versions of the dozens of screens that comprise the game. Thankfully, all that work wasn't just for show, resulting in clever puzzles that take the sun and moon into account. ■

**84**

**BELOW:** There are multiple dead-ends.



**NEED TO KNOW**

| EXPECT TO PAY | DEVELOPER | LINK |
|---|---|---|
| Free | GrahfMetal | bit.ly/SpectacleGame |

*OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott*

This isn't a screenshot. This issue of PCG can actually run *Doom*.

# PHOBOS BABY

## The timeless perfection of DOOM

**It's rare that the 'lone hero against hordes of enemies' trope lands. There are always moments where it feels like the game is helping you feel like a badass, and somehow, on some infinitesimal level, you know you're being lied to. *Doom* is different. There's a sense that the hordes of hell are protecting themselves from you, not the other way around.**

Games are often about feel. *Doom* might appear cardboardy and flat now, but two minutes into its violent, irresistible loop and you almost forget how it looks. The movement is slick and almost sickening, like that GIF of a cooked chicken sliding out of a can. There's a sense of perpetual motion that feels as immediate and satisfying as many modern shooters, but noticeably different, like a carnival shooting gallery and helter-skelter gave birth to something unholy and delicious. It's also gleefully ridiculous: a world where picking up multiple helmets somehow gives you more armour. Is Doomguy wearing them all? Does he put them on his knees and feet? If Mythbusters is still a thing then this demands exploration.

### MARS ATTACKS

*Doom* was terrifying when it was released. But now it's almost comforting. There's something about the pop of the pistol and the groan of distant monsters that's reassuring; the gaming equivalent of rain on a caravan roof. The aesthetics are perfect, too: candelabras and imposing grey technology. Bubbling green vats and sliding mechanical doors. Best of all, it still feels clever. There's a demonic guile to everything. Lifts drop you into waves of surprise enemies. Dark rooms with flickering fluorescent lights hide incoming waves. *Doom* always feels like it's trying to do something to you other than just fling endless repeating enemies at you (which, incidentally, it also does). It appears dumb and direct precisely because a team of extremely clever people have already done all the thinking for us. There's something special about the shape of it, too. Compared to modern corridor shooters, *Doom* is like a drawer of knotted charging cables, but somehow every one is the one you need. Paths loop back around on each other, spiralling around in mad, esoteric circles. But, at the same time it's hard to stay lost, just because *Doom* is pure momentum. You move so fast it feels like you'll blunder violently in the correct direction.

*Doom* is also, quite obviously, the most metal game ever made. You're constantly sprinting past the smashed bodies of demonic enemies to a soundtrack of staccato gunshots and crunching music, and it makes you feel like the most powerful person. Many wonderful things have spawned in *Doom*'s infernal wake, but few of them match its intensity. ■

**Quite obviously, the most metal game ever made**

### NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**
A Round The Twist episode in which the gang are trapped in a metal album

**EXPECT TO PAY**
£4

**DEVELOPER**
id Software

**PUBLISHER**
id Software

**REVIEWED ON**
Intel Core i7-7700, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 1070

**MULTIPLAYER**
Yes

**LINK**
store.steampowered.com/app/2280/DOOM_1993

**PC GAMER VERDICT**

The most comforting, nostalgic and relaxing way to ceaselessly murder endless waves of Satan's finest.

**93**

BELOW: Halloween week on Bake Off was a terrible failure.

# STAUF THIS

## The never-ending childhood horror of THE 7TH GUEST

**It's fascinating looking at comments from people who played *The 7th Guest* as children. It's a mix of nostalgia and swallowed trauma, like visiting a vintage fair with someone whose grandpa choked on a Pog.**

It's not that it's scary, as such. The performances are flamboyantly camp. It's stilted and strange. And the lead villain, Henry Stauf, looks more like a disgruntled gamekeeper than a grand supernatural menace. But there's a pervasive eeriness to everything that's still gripping. After years of acclimatisation, we have an idea what to expect from horror films and games, but *The 7th Guest*'s idiosyncrasies make it entirely unpredictable. It's from a time before the rules were written.

The presentation definitely helps. The voiceover is cosy, strange and soporific, like sliding into a suspiciously warm sleeping bag. And the cast of Poirot-style caricatures would jar even if the performances were good, which they absolutely aren't. It's not just the year of release – as you'll see below, it was entirely possible for a game from 1993 to have decent acting – but the bizarre, esoteric construction. Gently beckoning skeletal hands guide you around the mansion. Moving is like wading through waist-high fudge. Even the puzzles feel like an upsetting mix of amusing and unpleasant. This sense of feverish otherness is exacerbated by the FMV presentation which, thanks to the structure of other games, gives *The 7th Guest* a sense that it never starts, like one long, nightmarish cutscene. It's strange enough that it'll leave a mark even playing it now. ■

**68**

**NEED TO KNOW**

| EXPECT TO PAY | DEVELOPER | PUBLISHER |
|---|---|---|
| £7.20 | Trilobyte | MojoTouch |

# VOODOO CHILD

## GABRIEL KNIGHT: SINS OF THE FATHERS is a family affair

**You often wonder, playing a game from 1993, which 2020s tropes will age like milk. The setting and story of *Gabriel Knight* feel quite current. I can imagine a TV show about a rugged occult bookstore owner investigating dark mysteries. But everything else would be different.**

He wouldn't ride a motorbike and wear a long leather coat. He wouldn't have a voice like Duplo being tipped onto a wooden floor. And he wouldn't make jokes about violating human rights or ogling his secretary's legs. But functionally, there's loads here that feels rich and current. The dialogue options are deep and voluminous. There are multiple endings. And the presentation still feels crisp, perhaps because of recent point-and-click games, such as *Unavowed*, which reference the same systems. Best of all, though, is the sound. It's cosy and crackly, like listening to vinyl in an artisan bakery where someone else is picking up the bill. The voice talent helps: the original release has Tim Curry and Mark Hamill, and their absence from the *20th Anniversary Edition* is reason enough to seek out the original. It can be fiddly to navigate, but the pace of the story makes for a cosy experience: the adventure game equivalent of wrapping your hands around a warm cup of broth. There are dusty attics to explore, antique clock puzzles to solve, and grandmas to interrogate. At times it's a laborious way to explore, with enough clicking to risk carpal tunnel syndrome in even the most resistant wrists, but it's still a wonderful, wry, detailed slice of Deep South occultism. ■

**71**

BELOW: The more I play, the less convinced I am that it's Gabriel's nan.

**NEED TO KNOW**

| EXPECT TO PAY | DEVELOPER | PUBLISHER |
|---|---|---|
| £5 | Sierra On-Line | Activision |

*Winter Savings*

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# HARDWARE

## GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

94
**GROUP TEST**
30 years of graphics cards remembered

100
**TECH REPORT**
What did gaming PCs look like in 1993?

102
**TECH TALES**
Upgrading the machines of the past was not easy





104
**BUYERS GUIDE**
Build yourself a top gaming PC with our budgeted parts lists

GROUP TEST

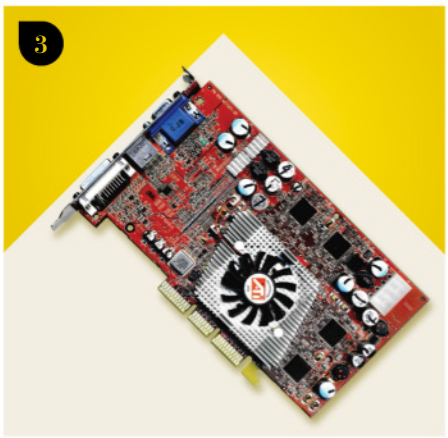
# THE GRAPHICS CARD GREATS

From the Voodoo Graphics to the RTX 4090, less than 30 years separates the first ever graphics cards from the best yet

*By Jacob Ridley*

**PC Gamer's first issue landed at a salient moment in PC gaming's history. Its very existence as a magazine dedicated to gaming on a personal computer speaks volumes for the importance of those years for our hobby. Less than 70 issues in, it had covered the rise of 3D graphics, physics, LAN parties and online gaming.**

But the mag also arrived just in time to capture the rise of the hardware that made it all possible. Namely, the graphics card. In the same year PC Gamer published its first words, Nvidia was founded, intent on creating a 3D accelerator to beat the rest. It would have its work cut out for it trying to dispatch 3dfx, which rose to prominence with the creation of the Voodoo Graphics card in 1996. From the beginnings of GeForce in 1999 through the 2000s, corporate consolidation would pit Nvidia against AMD for graphical dominance in a fiery battle still simmering today.



# Voodoo2

**3DFX, 1998**

## PC gaming's Ferrari F40

1 You may not look at an add-in card with 12MB of VRAM and see it as some kind of gaming panacea. But we did in the '90s. The Voodoo2 was a 3D graphics revolution. But how could 3dfx level up 1996's beloved Voodoo? The answer was to double almost everything. The Voodoo2 came with not one, not two, but three graphics chipsets. One is on frame buffer duty and the other two are dedicated to texture mapping. That's one more chip dedicated to chomping through textures than the original Voodoo Graphics, but these were faster and had access to double the memory.

This card was a night and day moment for PC gaming, like the veil slipping away from your eyes so you can finally see what a 3D world should look like.

The Voodoo2 had to be great, however. A gaming graphics upstart, founded by one Jensen Huang and named Nvidia, had created a real challenger to the Voodoo: the Riva 128. The Voodoo2 was 3dfx's way of closing the door on the Riva and Nvidia – and it worked, for a bit.

**PC GAMER VERDICT**

- Iconic
- Watershed moment for 3D
- Drool-worthy PCB

SPECS **YEAR:** 1998 / **CORE CLOCK SPEED:** 90MHZ / **MEMORY:** 8/12MB / **PROCESS NODE:** 350NM

# GeForce 256

**NVIDIA, 1999**

## Enter the GeForce

2 The GeForce 256 was the world's first GPU. It sounds odd to hear that claim made today, seeing as the term is ubiquitous for any graphics acceleration chip. That simply wasn't the case in 1999.

Nvidia needed a way to market its newly minted, fully integrated GeForce 256 – an add-in card capable of doing transform and lighting on-chip. It settled on GPU, a term that sounds a lot like something every PC needs: a CPU. As such, this moment is an early example of something we're very familiar with today: Nvidia's very clever marketing. The GeForce 256, however, wasn't all smoke and mirrors. It was a supremely capable graphics card with up to 32MB of memory, a 120Hz clock, and full support for the API of the moment, Direct3D 7.

The 256 laid down the foundations for PC gaming for years to come. While it wouldn't be for another generation before onboard transform and lighting really took hold, a single graphics chip with the required acceleration onboard remains the way in which GPUs are designed today.

**PC GAMER VERDICT**

- World's first GPU
- First ever GeForce, too
- Direct3D 7 compliant

SPECS **YEAR:** 1999 / **CORE CLOCK SPEED:** 120MHZ / **MEMORY:** 32MB DDR / **PROCESS NODE:** TSMC 220NM

**THERE REALLY WAS NO LOOKING BACK FOLLOWING THE LAUNCH OF THE GEFORCE 8800 GTX**

GROUP TEST

# Radeon 9800 Pro

ATI, 2003

## The red team scores

**3** If you're wondering where the red team is during all of this, by 2003, it's releasing the Radeon 9800 Pro. Though this isn't AMD. No, I'm talking about the original red team, ATi.

Before ATi was assimilated into the green team in 2006 (that was AMD at the time – confusing, right?), it was producing some absolutely stellar graphics cards. One such card, and an absolute fan favourite, is the Radeon 9800 Pro. This card came out during a time when the company felt it had to do something big to win market share in an extremely competitive market ruled by its competitors. And, boy, did ATI go big. The Radeon 9800 Pro was the Nvidia-bashing card of the moment. A wide memory bus, up to 256MB of VRAM, and cheery performance with the latest anti-aliasing techniques – which were becoming a key part of PC gaming at the time – saw it dominate in benchmarks. Reviewers loved it. A real crowd-pleaser – not least because you could buy the cheaper Radeon 9500 and flash its BIOS for better performance.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ATI's champion
- Wide memory bus
- Nvidia killer

SPECS **YEAR:** 2003 / **CORE CLOCK SPEED:** 380MHZ / **MEMORY:** 128MB/256MB DDR2 / **PROCESS NODE:** TSMC 150NM

# GeForce 8800 GTX

NVIDIA, 2006

## Unified, supercharged

**4** You can point to any successful 3D accelerator or GPU from the annals of PC gaming history and say "that's the one that changed everything". But at risk of sounding like a broken record, there really was no looking back following the launch of the GeForce 8800 GTX.

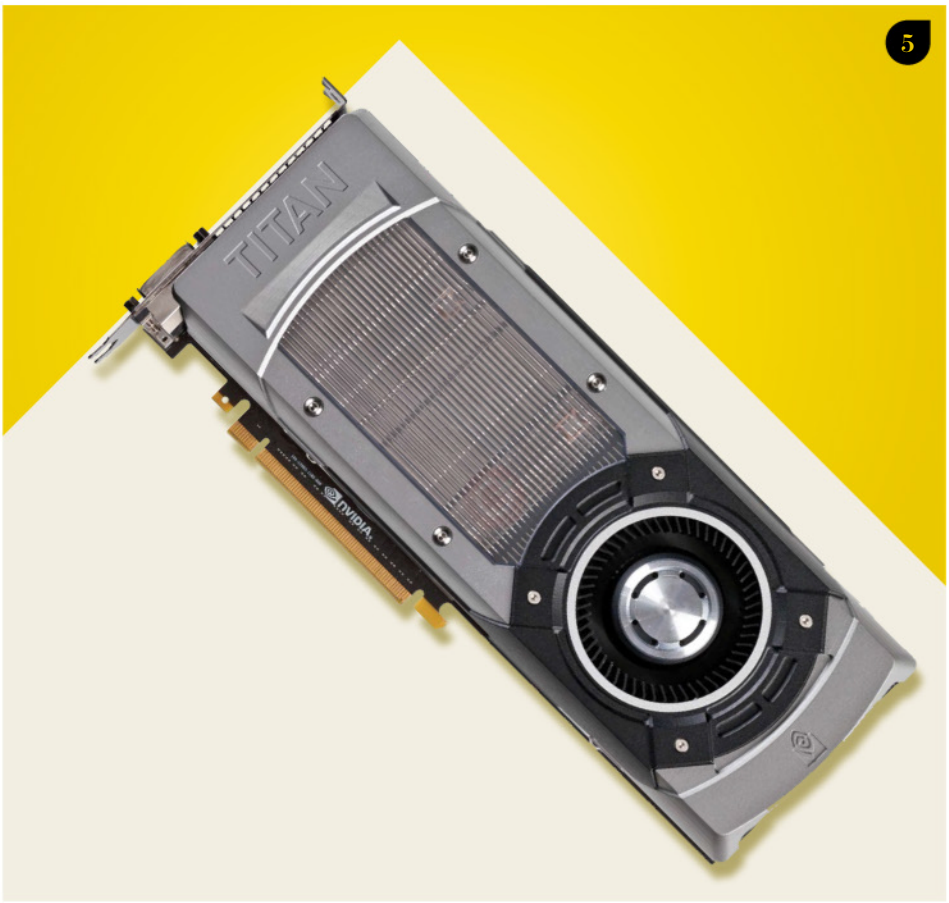
The 8800 GTX came with 128 shaders, a 1.35GHz shader clock, 768MB of GDDR3 RAM, a 155W TDP and a dual-slot design. And in that specs sheet is the secret to its success. The GeForce 8 series housed a unified shader architecture, the first of its kind, that was built to play nicely with DirectX 10. The architecture, nicknamed Tesla, relied on a collection of up to 128 unified shaders to carry out all key functions required of a graphics card. This differs to the fixed function blocks found on older accelerators. If lots of geometry was required, the unified shaders would run as geometry shaders. If you need lots of computation per pixel, they'd run as pixel shaders. They're everything to every function. We've never moved away from this unified shading model since.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- A modern architecture
- Progenitor to modern cards
- Super beefy

SPECS **YEAR:** 2006 / **CORE CLOCK SPEED:** 575MHZ / **MEMORY:** 768MB GDDR3 / **PROCESS NODE:** TSMC 90NM

**THE GTX TITAN WAS ALSO THE BEGINNING OF THE END FOR DUAL-GPU SETUPS**




## HONOURABLE MENTIONS

**3dfx Voodoo Graphics** 1996
PC gaming wouldn't be the same without it.

**Nvidia Riva 128** 1997
Without this, we might not have the Voodoo2.

**ATI Radeon HD 5970** 2009
Two graphics cards in one.

**Nvidia GeForce GTX 1080 Ti** 2017
The daddy.

## DISHONOURABLE MENTIONS

**Nvidia GeForce FX 5800** 2003
Underwhelming at best.

**Nvidia GeForce GTX 970** 2014
See: class-action lawsuit.

**AMD Radeon VII** 2019
AMD's best card ever. For five months.

**Intel Larrabee** Unreleased
Canned before its time.

# GeForce GTX Titan

NVIDIA, 2013

## The SLI killer

5 You might not like paying high prices for graphics cards but the trend towards ever bigger, ever more expensive GPUs is one we can't ignore when talking about PC gaming's hardware history. The card that arguably kicked it all off was the GTX Titan.

For many years you could buy a professional-grade GPU for a pretty penny, but the GTX Titan in 2013 was when this sort of overkill card became a possibility for PC gamers. It features 2,688 CUDA Cores and 6GB of GDDR5 – not all that far off an RTX 4050 in some regards, which was released a whole decade later. The GTX Titan was also the beginning of the end for dual-GPU setups. While the card supported SLI, the multi-GPU interface from Nvidia, a single card was able to tear through the latest games just fine on its own. Why bother stringing two together with questionable driver support when one would suffice? SLI is dead today – if you want high-end 4K, spend the money on an ultra-enthusiast card. Perhaps the GTX Titan's modern-day equivalent, the RTX 4090.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Titan by name
- Titan by nature
- Titanic price tag

SPECS **YEAR:** 2013 / **CORE CLOCK SPEED:** 837MHZ / **MEMORY:** 6,144MB GDDR5 / **PROCESS NODE:** TSMC 28NM

# GeForce RTX 4090

NVIDIA, 2022

## The best around

6 Every GPU generation there's the card that gamers want. For the RTX 40-series, that's the RTX 4090. Would you believe the RTX 4090 is one of the better bang-for-your-buck graphics cards available today? No, I haven't hit my head. It's just pound-for-pound a decent deal considering the hardware you get in return for parting with, ahem, £1,699. Look, I never said it was cheap, just a better deal than most other cards today.

The RTX 4090 features 16,384 CUDA Cores alongside 24GB of GDDR6X. That's 509% more cores than a GTX Titan and 300% more memory. A bit of an unfair comparison, but compare it to the RTX 4080 and it has 68% more CUDA Cores than an RTX 4080 for 33% more cash.

While a luxury that I cannot afford, the RTX 4090 marks a major uplift in performance even over the RTX 3090 Ti it ostensibly replaces. Even without upscaling in the picture, nearly double the performance is a pretty sure-fire way to win my favour. It's a beast that has no equal – AMD didn't even try to match it.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- World-beating frame rates
- Frame Gen
- Eye-watering price

SPECS **YEAR:** 2022 / **CORE CLOCK SPEED:** 2,520MHZ / **MEMORY:** 24GB GDDR6X / **PROCESS NODE:** TSMC 5NM

TECH REPORT

Home computers were a novel concept – it was offices where PCs had first boomed.

# ANTIQUE CODE SHOW

## What did gaming PCs look like when PCG issue 1 hit the shelves in '93?

**"If you thought 1993 was a good year for PC junkies," wrote the LA Times on Christmas eve 1993, "just wait until 1994. Prices will continue to plummet, just as they did in 1993". Firstly, can we all agree to go back to calling ourselves PC junkies? And second, that quote captures a pivotal moment. Home computers were indeed becoming more affordable year on year, and a storm was gathering that would birth PC gaming as we know it.**

Id Software knew this when it launched *Doom* in December of '93. Future Publishing knew it when some forward-thinking execs had launched the first issue of a magazine called PC Gamer a month previously. People had been using computers to play games since there had been people, computers and games, but '93 represents the start of PC gaming in the modern sense, and that comes down to hardware.

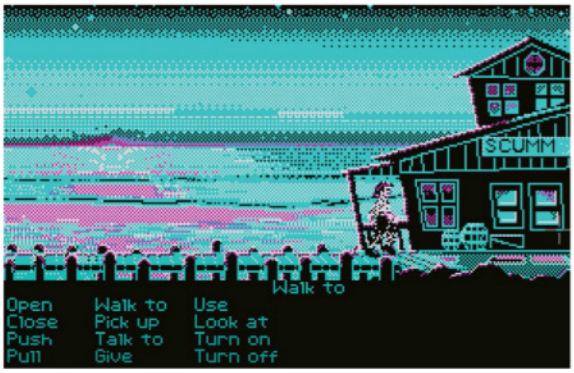
"Intel's popular 33 Mhz 486 CPU cost PC makers $1,056 in 1990 in quantities of 1,000," the LA Times article continues. "At the end of 1992 it cost $329. Starting next week, it will be $272." That tells you everything about why gaming grew in popularity. At the start of the decade, you could take a 486-based system out of the shop and into your designated computer room for about £2,000. By 1993 that price tag represented the very highest end of the market, reserved for professional workstations and top-spec machines. You could spend £700 and walk out with a gaming-ready PC. What about the price tag for a gaming PC? There was no such thing. If the very idea of having one of these things in your home was still relatively fresh, the idea of owning one whose express purpose was playing games was akin to buying an iPhone in 2023 but using it only to play *Subway Surfers*. Marketers at the time simply hadn't anticipated that consumer behaviour was heading in that direction, so there were no gamer edition models in the electronics shops of the early '90s. Game consoles sat in the toy department, computers were put next to the TVs, and never the twain shall meet.

There was also the small matter that the components inside PCs at the time didn't delineate by gaming applications – in other words, we didn't have graphics cards yet. We had video cards, whose circuitry became central to running 3D applications like games, but which weren't marketed as gaming components. These were simply the boards that handled everything that showed up on your display. The aforementioned Intel 486 didn't boast about gaming performance, either. Instead, Intel's language, like everyone else at the time, was about productivity and user experience.

There was a real thrill to playing games on the PCs of this era for that very reason. It felt like subverting the very raison d'etre of a stiff-starched machine designed for Lotus 1-2-3 to load up *Doom* and watch benign Windows 3.1 menus give way to Cacodemons drenched in viscera. To be a PC gamer at the

### Party like it's 1999

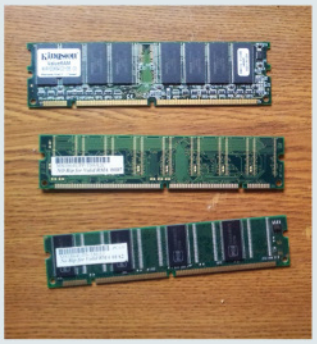
In six short years, from when PCG issue 1 went on sale to the turn of the millennium, PCs transformed completely. From CPUs with clock speeds at 33Hz in '93, by 2000 we had AMD Athlon chips that broke 1GHz, and with L3 cache. RAM standards increased from 2MB to 2GB. VGA cards gave way to 3D accelerators with more grunt on a discrete card than entire PCs had years before. Remember the pace of progress, next time Nvidia tries to convince you a 4090 is worth £1,500.




**FAR LEFT:** This is what bleeding edge tech looked like when PCG was born.

**LEFT:** If you didn't have a VGA card, games looked like this. CGA was not easy on the eye.

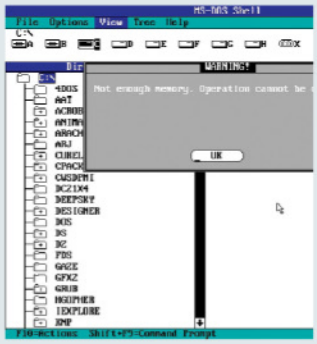
## NUMBER OF THE BEAST *Doom's minimum requirements, December 1993*



**4MB RAM**
That's right, a whole four megabytes. Fast-page memory was getting more affordable by '94, so soon after launch, most systems had at least 4MB.

**INTEL 80386 CPU**
Processors handled a lot of graphics tasks at the time *Doom* released. That it only needed a humble 386 is testament to Carmack's genius.

**2.39MB STORAGE SPACE**
Doom came on four floppy discs – discs that sell for upwards of £1,200 for a complete set now. The sum total of the data contained within? 2.39MB.



**DOS 4.0**
Before mouse support, before nostalgic login sounds, we had this: a rudimentary set of menus and bleeps that absolutely, proudly, never bloody worked. QUIT? Y.

time this magazine's first issue went to print was to be a jailbreaker of previously feckless beige workstations, harnessing their power with evil intent. Nobody was selling home computers based on their ability to do this. Not yet.

### COMPUTING HARDWARE

What might you find inside the off-white panels of 1993's home computing hardware? Typically 2-4MB of 'fast-page' RAM, which interfaced with the CPU via an L1 cache layer only. Lightning-quick at the time, but the pace of development through the '90s made those specs glacially slow within two years. *Doom*'s minimum specs required at least 4MB of RAM – not a given on PCs in 1993.

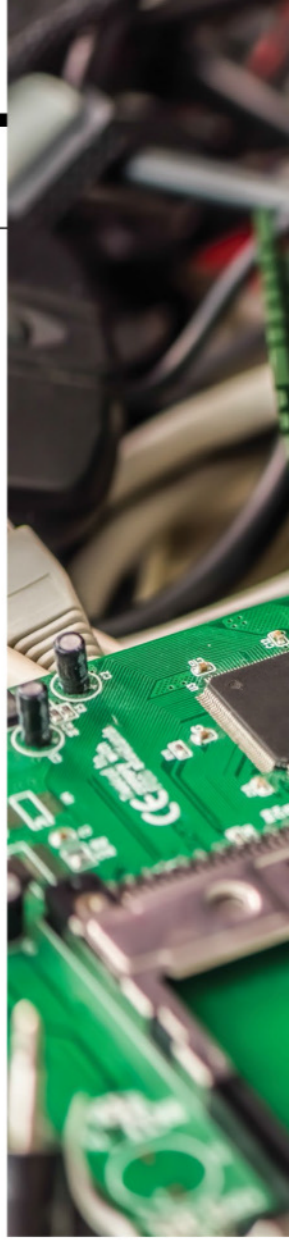
CPUs were broadly x86-based. Newer models were built around 486 chips which ran at up to 66MHz, but 386 chips were still up to the job for most games of the day. Interestingly, Intel's most advanced consumer chips of the day could address up to 4GB of RAM, and although you couldn't buy modules that capacious at the time, the fact that its chip architecture at least had the capability paved the way for newer Windows releases over the decade – it gave Microsoft a steer as to where hardware specs were going, and what kind of ceiling it would have to work with.

**NEWER MODELS WERE BUILT AROUND 486 CHIPS WHICH RAN AT UP TO 66MHZ**

Going in deeper, by 1993 you'd find a VGA card nestled in among all the wires and unbranded PCBs. These cards could handle the previous CGA and EGA standards of the '80s, but they were also capable of outputting 256 colours at 320x200 resolution, or 16 colours at 640x480. By this time, SVGA (super-VGA) cards had also entered the market which allowed higher resolutions and 2D image acceleration, but a lot of sprite rendering and animation work was handled by the CPU at this time. It would be three years before the 3dfx Voodoo 3D graphics card launched, and the rest of the decade would see an unprecedented surge forward in videogame graphics that made use of these discrete cards to render polygonal shapes in 3D space.

Propelled into higher echelons by the ingenious lines of code beneath *Doom*'s glistening exterior, PC games were about to take over, and shortly after 1993, manufacturers realised gamers represented a large and passionate sub-section of PC users. Our needs were specific – we'd gladly leave the printer and the Encarta CD-ROMs in the store but add an SVGA card. And as we were running our new purchase through the till, we'd pick up a copy of PC Gamer too, to figure out which new virtual delights awaited us on our new systems. ■

***Phil Iwaniuk***



# SMASHING PINS

## Despite all the rage, hardware upgrades were possible in '93

**In 2023, we turn up our noses if we don't like the RGB lighting strips running along our graphics card. In 1993, the select few enthusiasts who ever dared meddle with the inner workings of their home computer were delighted just to correctly identify their VGA card. Quite aside from the astronomical rise in computational power since issue 1 of this magazine hit the shelves, we've seen an equally dramatic transformation in the way desktop machines are put together. It's basically nerd Lego now, a toybox of coloured parts that fit together in an outrageously proportioned, liquid-cooled display cabinet. But when PC Gamer launched, upgrading your computer was beyond daunting.**

And yet people braved it nonetheless. Driven forwards into the gaping maw of a PC's razor-sharp case panels by a combination of sheer fascination and a desire to keep their rapidly redundant machines current, the early pioneers installed sound cards and SVGA cards. They upgraded their processors without a single millisecond of consideration for RAM cooler clearance because processors didn't need coolers yet. These brave individuals whacked network cards and game controller adapters into their rigs, and in doing so they brought about a change to the way manufacturers designed computers.

Because, peering into a beige case in '93, you would have been met with an unfamiliar sight. Firstly, an absolute morass of wires. Wires coming out of everything, wires between wires. No consideration was given to airflow because there was no airflow. There was only wire. Beneath that layer, you found the PCBs. These all looked absolutely identical, had no identifying markers, and were each connected to about 80 wires.

The first job, then, was to identify the component you wanted to replace, and remove it. Without the innate knowledge of how components fit together we have in our collective consciousness now, this was a supreme challenge. And this was where games mags like PC Gamer came in. It was from the pages of hardware writer Simon Williams' Systems section, the precursor to the very section you read now, that PC gamers built up an understanding of how PC interiors were laid out, and how to perform tasks we might now consider basic. These first intrepid canaries down the beige mine became the older siblings and the playground gurus who told a younger generation about fitting RAM modules and hooking up a VGA card. They popularised upgrade culture, and manufacturers had to respond with more user-friendly interior designs.

**MANUFACTURERS HAD TO RESPOND WITH MORE USER-FRIENDLY DESIGNS**

### CHEESE GRATERS

We've got a lot to thank them for. As a young staff writer on PC Format in the 2000s, I regularly lacerated my extremities on poorly finished cases, but it was much worse in the decade prior. Swapping a processor chip in a PC in the early '90s was like plucking a grain of sand out of a pile of cheese graters. Manufacturers simply didn't consider that people would be going inside their machines – it would have been akin to popping the bonnet on your hatchback and swapping out the air filter. A very small hardcore population might do it, but not so many people that the ease of the upgrade should ever be considered. It took a long time to adapt this thinking. Decades. But it began during this pivotal era when playing games on your home computer was really taking off.

There was a bigger hurdle than the katana-sharp cases, the miniscule operating space or the inherent unfamiliarity of the layout, though, and that hurdle was compatibility. An eager young gamer in '93 reads about SVGA cards and decides they quite like the sound of higher resolutions and accelerated 2D graphics. They want to buy one. So they flip through the pages of a magazine and find a mail order ad with dozens of video cards listed in tiny typeface. Which should

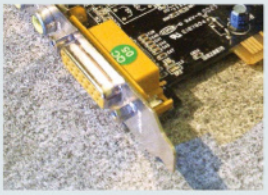
**PHIL IWANIUK**
Beige hardware fetishist Phil Iwaniuk can often be found running a furtive finger along PCG's office printers. We've told security about him, but he keeps getting in. We suspect he sleeps in the toilets.

## MUSEUM PIECES *Four components that stayed in the '90s*

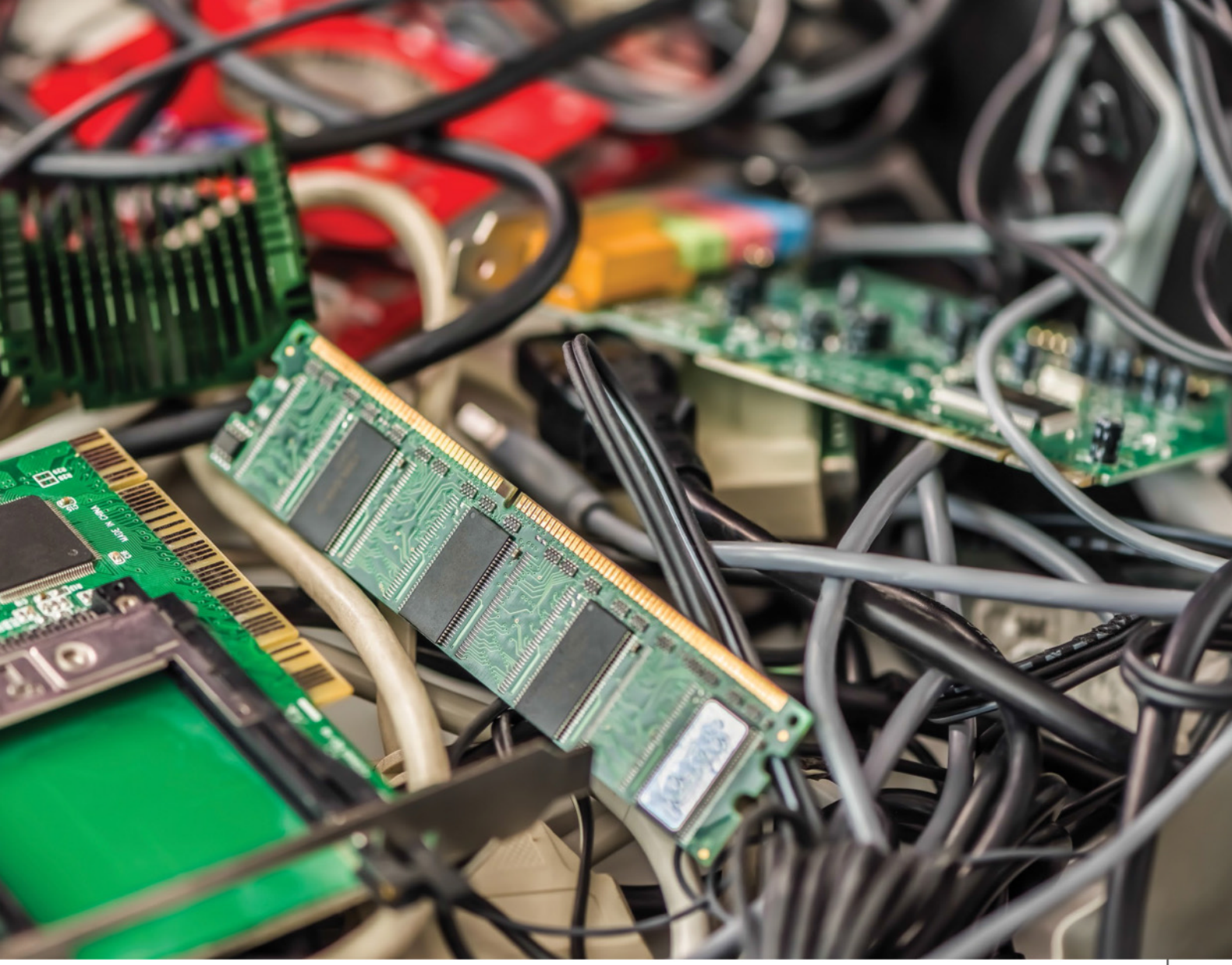
**SOUND CARDS**
Before graphics cards were a thing, we lusted after Creative Sound Blaster Pro IIs. Money well spent.

**MODEMS**
Because how else are you going to connect to the web? A wireless receiver? Witchcraft. What you needed was a big grey box.

**PRINTERS**
No gamer especially wanted a home printer in '93, but you just try walking out of an electronics store without one.



**GAME CONTROLLER ADAPTER CARDS**
USB changed everything, including the necessity for a card you plugged your joystick into.



they choose? Would it work with their operating system? Would their motherboard recognise it? Is there space inside their PC for it? Not only did they not know, the card's manufacturer probably didn't either.

If the practice of hardware upgrades during this era could be summed up in three words, those words would be trial and error. That was it. That was all we had before internet message boards and YouTube tutorials. Hardware companies didn't offer any information before the point of purchase, and the landscape was such a primeval swamp of burgeoning component brands and products that if something didn't work after you bought it, it was basically impossible to figure out why.

We owe our entire pastime to the savants who trial and errored their way through the hardware upgrades of the Windows 3.1 era. Now's a fitting time to take a moment to thank them. Thanks for all the cuts, the broken circuit boards and sunk costs. Thanks for writing about your discoveries and sharing them with us all. You walked, so that we could run custom RGB profiles. ■

***Phil Iwaniuk***

**ABOVE:** Upgrading was a messy business throughout the '90s.

**BELOW:** '90s PC gaming perfection, if you could build it.

YOUR NEXT PC

# BUYER'S GUIDE

## Build the best PC for your budget

### KEY

**Budget build**

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

**Mid-range build**

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

**Advanced build**

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

# BUDGET BUILD

## Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank

**TOTAL**
**£1,058**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| MOTHERBOARD | | **B660M Pro RS**<br>ASRock **£115**<br>This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line. |
| PROCESSOR | | **Core i5 13400F**<br>Intel **£199**<br>Intel's added four more cores to its entry-level Core i5 and it's become even more fantastic value. |
| GRAPHICS CARD | | **GeForce RTX 4060**<br>Nvidia **£288**<br>One of the cheaper ways to score Nvidia's latest gaming architecture and DLSS 3 support. |
| COOLER | | **Laminar RM1 (included with CPU)**<br>Intel **Free**<br>There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU cooler will work just fine. |
| MEMORY | | **T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB**<br>Teamgroup **£40**<br>Goodbye 8GB, hello 16GB of speedy DDR4-3200. |
| POWER SUPPLY | | **Pure Power 12 M 550W**<br>Be Quiet! **£91**<br>We have to run a 550W PSU for the RTX 4060, as per Nvidia's recommendations. |
| SSD | | **WD Black SN770 500GB**<br>Western Digital **£35**<br>It's finally time to ditch SATA and go for an NVMe drive even in a budget machine such as this. |
| HDD | | **WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm**<br>Western Digital **£38**<br>You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash (we don't budget it), but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder. |
| CASE | | **Zauron**<br>Aerocool **£32**<br>This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling. |
| DISPLAY | | **Mobiuz EX240**<br>BenQ **£145**<br>You can get an excellent gaming monitor for not a huge sum of cash nowadays, and this BenQ is our favourite on a budget. |
| KEYBOARD | | **KM250 RGB**<br>G.Skill **£49**<br>It's actually mind blowing what you can pick up for this little cash: A hot-swappable mechanical board that looks lovely. |
| MOUSE | | **G203**<br>Logitech **£24**<br>A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. |
| HEADSET | | **HS55 Stereo**<br>Corsair **£40**<br>Corsair's budget cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money. |

# MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games

**TOTAL**
**£1,532**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| MOTHERBOARD | | **B660M Mortar WiFi**<br>MSI **£177**<br>This MSI board delivers everything we need in a compact package and allows us to use much cheaper DDR4 memory. |
| PROCESSOR | | **Core i5 13400F**<br>Intel **£199**<br>Yes, this is the same CPU as the budget build. It's simply too good value to miss and perfect for high fps gaming. |
| GRAPHICS CARD | | **RX 7700 XT**<br>AMD **£430**<br>If you can spare the extra cash, the RX 7800 XT is a tantalising upgrade. Nevertheless, we'll opt for AMD's cheaper card. |
| COOLER | | **Laminar RM1 (included with CPU)**<br>Intel **Free**<br>Intel bundles a redesigned CPU cooler with some 13th Gen processors. This little chip chiller will serve us well for a while |
| MEMORY | | **Vengeance LPX 16GB DDR4-3200**<br>Corsair **£36**<br>With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more. |
| POWER SUPPLY | | **Pure Power 12 M 650W**<br>Be Quiet! **£107**<br>This larger Be Quiet! PSU offers a stable platform with modern PCIe 5.0 connectivity. |
| SSD | | **WD Black SN770 1TB**<br>Western Digital **£42**<br>There are faster PCIe 4.0 drives, but this is the best value for money SSD around. |
| HDD | | **WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm**<br>Western Digital **£38**<br>Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary or in the costing, but it's nice to have plenty of extra space. |
| CASE | | **H7**<br>NZXT **£100**<br>It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too. |
| DISPLAY | | **S2722DGM**<br>Dell **£260**<br>With a snappy 165Hz refresh rate and a 1440p resolution, this Dell is an enviable blend of monitor performance. |
| KEYBOARD | | **KM250 RGB**<br>GO.Skill **£49**<br>You could spend more for a full-size gaming keyboard, but this G.Skill will certainly suffice for most gamers. |
| MOUSE | | **DeathAdder V2**<br>Razer **£47**<br>Tried and tested, this Razer mouse is a superb companion for competitive gaming without breaking the bank. |
| HEADSET | | **Blackshark V2**<br>Razer **£85**<br>The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too. |

# ADVANCED BUILD

## Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds

**TOTAL**
**£5,300**

MOTHERBOARD

**MEG X670E Ace**
MSI **£715**
There are cheaper X670 boards than this, but we're going extreme and this is one of the most fully featured around.

PROCESSOR

**Ryzen 9 7950X3D**
AMD **£669**
AMD's 3D stacked chips are awesome for gaming, thanks to heaps of cache. This Ryzen 9 is the best of the bunch

GRAPHICS CARD

**GeForce RTX 4090**
Nvidia **£1,500**
The RTX 4090 is immense, in every way. The performance it offers is unmatched by any GPU out there.

COOLER

**Kraken X63**
NZXT **£155**
One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump, though you'll have to request an AM5 bracket for AMD compatibility.

MEMORY

**Trident Z5 RGB (2x16GB)**
G.Skill **£118**
This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.

POWER SUPPLY

**Prime TX-1000**
Seasonic **£340**
An ATX 3.0 PSU would also be good here, but we've tested this Seasonic and know it's worthy of such a build.

BOOT DRIVE

**WD Black SN850X 2TB**
Western Digital **£110**
You could drop in a PCIe 5.0 SSD into this build, but it's even too overkill for us right now. The SN850X is a superb PCIe 4.0 drive.

DATA DRIVE

**Crucial P5 Plus 2TB**
Crucial **£96**
This isn't quite as fast as our boot drive, but it'll more than suffice for storing heaps of games.

CASE

**5000D**
Corsair **£140**
We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.

DISPLAY

**34 QD-OLED (AW3423DWF)**
Alienware **£929**
You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.

KEYBOARD

NEW ENTRY

**ROG Azoth**
Asus **£250**
This keyboard's secret? Lubed switches. Don't knock it until you've tried it. It's also wireless and very well made.

MOUSE

**G502 Lightspeed**
Logitech **£120**
With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.

HEADSET

**Arctis 7 Wireless**
SteelSeries **£158**
If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

# EXTRA LIFE

## CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

# "I took on the role of DPS while my friend lured Radahn around his arena"

## Surviving ELDEN RING with a buddy in co-op

**Nothing has made me more desperate for a proper co-op mode in a *Souls* game than the *Elden Ring Seamless Co-op* mod. Brutal bosses and treacherous caves are a lot more fun with a friend by your side. But unlike FromSoftware's own version of co-op where your ally can only stick around until you defeat a boss, the mod gives both players an all-day pass to the entirety of the Lands Between.**

The *Seamless Co-op* mod itself is a miracle. FromSoftware's games are not particularly friendly to modders and, historically, adding any kind of multiplayer to a game seems to be difficult. Somehow, the mod's developer, LukeYui, made it work well enough that you can play through the entire game, quests and all. It has its fair share of bugs, but you get a solid *Elden Ring* experience.


TYLER COLP

THIS MONTH
Exploited gaming's holy trinity once again.

ALSO PLAYED
*Cyberpunk 2077 2.0, Honkai: Star Rail*


Played with a friend, *Elden Ring* is transformed into the world's saddest theme park. What were once major obstacles as a solo player are still obstacles, but you can build around them. *Elden Ring* asks you to be fairly well-rounded in your stats and gear normally. So my friend and I split duties: she keeps a sword and shield and I wear paper-thin armour while I cast devastating magic rocks. The game has a surprising amount of synergy that surfaces once you can rely on having another person there the entire time.

**TOP:** Co-op makes fighting groups of enemies a satisfying challenge.

As a solo player, the fight against Radahn can get messy fast. He's fast, aggressive and will kill you in a single hit. It's a boss made to test your patience and riding skills as both of you spend most of it on horseback. Fragile players have to rely on summoning NPCs to distract him.

### TINY HORSE

In the co-op mod, I took on the role of DPS while my friend lured Radahn around his arena. All my years playing MMOs prepared me to solve problems by specialising characters

**WE HAD TO LEARN WHERE THERE WAS A GAP WE COULD SQUEEZE SOME HITS IN**

Late-game areas are much easier if you plan out your approach before engaging in a fight.

into roles. Bosses rarely have attacks designed to threaten multiple players, so you can abuse that.

Both of us had to learn where there was a gap between his attacks that we could squeeze some hits in. Some fights would fail because I couldn't put in enough damage before my friend ran out of healing items. Other fights would go sour because Radahn would surprise us with a flurry of lethal attacks. Victory only arrived when we both had a firm grip on his patterns and kept him busy as a team, leaving Radahn no good answer for who to attack.

We went on to take that half-a-D&D-party method through the first half of the game. There were times when there was simply not enough room to pull off our scheme, and *Elden Ring* reminded us how brutal it can be, but we've remained flexible in our tactics. Now, we're both carrying around strong two-handed weapons to pulverise our enemies before they can strike. I fully expect to get crushed by some unflinching late-game bosses when we get there. But I'm confident we can mix and match the right stats, gear, and tactics to get the job done. And with FromSoftware games, a win is a win, no matter what. ■

Talk about being sharply dressed.

# "Suddenly I'm invested in politics"

## Having a catwalk-off in PHANTOM LIBERTY

ROBERT JONES

**THIS MONTH**
Took a break from high-stakes espionage to look hot as hell.

**ALSO PLAYED**
*Starfield, Baldur's Gate III*

**I think it's the moment when I get blown off my feet by the crashing Space Force One presidential jet, its inferno-clad, exploding engines singeing my very ragged cropped hairdo as it almost scalps me, that I realise that I may have bitten off more than I can chew with this gig.**

This is especially true because I, as a person, am already rapidly fading away thanks to my consciousness being overwritten by a long-dead rockstar (don't ask!). Oh, and did I mention that I've just accepted a certain-death mission to extract the president of the New United States of America from the most dangerous area of Night City, one controlled by an armed-to-the-teeth private military company? Yeah, I'm fucked.

### EXTREME PREJUDICE

More out of a desperate, animalistic desire to not kick the bucket until the absolute bitter end, I run and gun my way through the carnage the crashing Space Force One presidential jet has left and reach the wreckage. It's besieged by the PMC troops but, despite being one bullet away from dropping multiple times, I make it to the jet and, guided by my handler for this fubar gig, I approach the still-sealed saferoom within, the supposed location of the president.

I open the door and, out of nowhere, Rosalind Myers, the president of the NUSA and former CEO of the Militech corporation, blindsides me, knocking me to the floor and then pointing a very lethal Kyubi powered assault rifle in my face. Myers is clearly no delicate flower, and that's good, as once I've explained rapidly that I'm on her side here, we both have to take out more PMC troops with extreme prejudice. Myers unloads the Kyubi with wild abandon, gunning down man and machine alike. Why do I suddenly feel more invested in politics?

Myers isn't just a warrior on the battlefield, but she's also impeccably dressed, too, with a super stylish white pantsuit immediately making me feel terribly unfashionable in comparison. My streetkid chic of full-body latex suit, baggy fatigues and high-collared vest just doesn't match up, so I decide to change into something more glam. After all, if I'm going to shortly go out, then I'm going to go out in style. ■

# "I just beat a satanic monk to death with a lavatory seat, and it felt good"

## Embracing pixellation and inanimate objects in retro-inspired CULTIC

**I've already completed *Cultic*, a recently released retro-style FPS developed by Jasozz Games and published by 3D Realms. It's a fulfilling spiritual successor to Monolith's 1997 classic *Blood*, but now I need a new challenge, can I complete the first level unarmed?**

I'll be throwing objects instead, and I'm cheating slightly by classing the axe as an object, but only because it's chuck-able. Other throwable items include chairs, barrels and Tabasco sauce bottles, to name but a few.

I awake in pit of corpses and dash to the first door I find. Inside the building are cell blocks, and within the cells are toilets. It transpires that smashing the porcelain to pieces transforms the toilet seat into a throwable object, so within the next 60 seconds I pick it up, carry it through the adjoining room and throw it at a possessed monk, turning him into giblets. It felt pretty good.

After repeatedly hurling this very dangerous toilet seat, it eventually clips through a flight of stairs and vanishes, so the next corridor involves wall to wall axe throwing. In amongst the piles of guts, a monk's head has turned into an interactive object. There's my next weapon.

Beyond the prison gates the cultists camp out in the hills, toasting marshmallows and surrounded by lanterns. These are the only genuinely useful throwable items, so I pick one up and carry it along a narrow hillside path, across a rickety bridge to the edge of an encampment, before I fling it into a huddled group of monks. They burst into flames and run around, cowls ablaze, sandals smouldering.

**A HUGE LUMBERING ENTITY WIELDING A CHAINSAW SMASHES THROUGH**

### LIONEL LAIR

On medium difficulty *Cultic* is genuinely tricky, particularly by this point, as the protagonists have firearms and I don't.

I approach another huge pit full of corpses. Jumping down into the bodies I know there's no way out, but I feel buoyed by the bottle of Tabasco I'm brandishing.

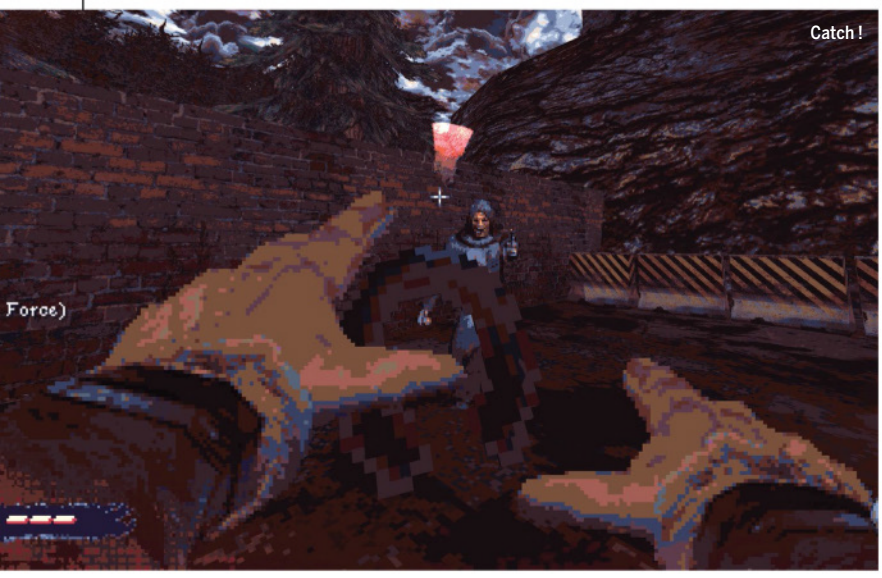
I enter a dark tunnel leading from the pit to the mine gates, squelching through pixellated corpses and brushing past hanging bodies wrapped in sacks. I find the mine gate but it's locked, and I need a key.

Around the next corner are more dangling bodies and I carefully tiptoe around some large rusty hunting traps into what looks like a monster's lair. There I find the key glimmering in the darkness. The moment I pick it up there's an unholy wail. As I run back towards the gate with the key, a huge lumbering entity wielding a chainsaw smashes through a wooden barricade. The corpses drop from the ceiling and chase me, and chainsaw face is now hurling more traps and grenades at me in the darkness. It's the bitter end. Not even the spiciest Tabasco can get me out of this one. ■

### JOHN STRIKE

**THIS MONTH**
Met the actual puppeteer for Jabba the Hutt's left arm.

**ALSO PLAYED**
A very short game of hide and seek in a field.



**LEFT:** I'll take that, thank you.

**BELOW:** Chainsaw face would like his key back now.

# "The narrative should obscure these systems, but Bethesda drops this ball"

## Houston, we have lots of problems, in STARFIELD

**My eight-year-old has ADHD so I hear "I'M BORED" a lot. I remind myself that's a function of his operating system, a complex set of emotions and processes. Otherwise, I'd just point out the million things he could do and complain about his inability to enjoy them.**

I am playing *Starfield*, and I am BORED. A million things to do and I'm not enjoying any of it. Now, I'm not neurotypical either, but I don't think I'm the issue.

Videogames rely on the metagame. We hear someone talking about the barkeep with a problem, we hear "quest". Progress. But the best games make us forget all this by weaving an illusion. They make it easy to choose to believe in a story to spark your imagination. *Starfield* fails spectacularly in this regard.

Mechanically, it does nothing particularly well. There's workable space combat, for example, but the cockpit is mostly for show, as is the travel. Loading screens for take-off and landing. Getting on and off your ship. Any journey. It breaks immersion every time. I'm not flying a spaceship. I'm fast-forwarding through the good bits. For all its flaws, *Elite: Dangerous* is seamless. *Jedi: Survivor* hides its loading screens with interactivity. I board Mantis, choose a destination, and see it fly, tending plants while I wait.

MATT KILLEEN

**THIS MONTH**
Paid for a rocket, got a sparkler.

**ALSO PLAYED**
*Elite: Dangerous, Slipways, EA Sports FC 24, Battlefront 2*

### UNAVOIDABLE COMBAT

Instead, I zap from corridor to metaphorical corridor, to engage in unavoidable so-so combat, stealing things as I go. I guess they're useful, but my rampant larceny is just gaming habit. Then I have to play the inventory management minigame.

**I ZAP FROM CORRIDOR TO METAPHORICAL CORRIDOR, TO ENGAGE IN SO-SO COMBAT**

The narrative should obscure these systems, but Bethesda drops this ball too. Coleridge stated that "if a writer could infuse a 'human interest and a semblance of truth' into a fantastic tale, the reader would suspend judgement".

This kind of sci-fi also requires a sense of wonder. No amount of exploring has provided any 'wow' moments. It's an unattractive game and for all its processing demands, graphically unimpressive.

Ten million people were playing *Starfield* simultaneously recently. Faced with the man behind the curtain, many seem capable of the doublethink required to ignore him. I'd love to able to do that. Maybe that's a neurotypical thing? Maybe its endgame is worth it? It'll be modded into something more, but what we've been given is an ugly world, clunky systems and a baby's-first-sci-fi story. And dad, I'm BORED. ■

# BALDUR'S GATE III

Larian has made one of the best RPGs ever even better. *By Tyler Wilde*

**A weird property of videogames is that, no matter how long they've been in development, as soon as they release about one million voices will shout in unison, "Hey, how come you didn't include this feature we were obviously going to want?"**

For *Starfield*, it was city maps, because instead of proper street maps the RPG launched with sparse dot fields that look like abstract illustrations of loneliness. For *Baldur's Gate III*, it was the ability to change your appearance mid-game, as well as the option to boot co-op characters from your party so that you aren't stuck with your friend's green-haired bard named Sherlock Gnome. Bethesda's still working on the maps, but remarkably, Larian has already added both of those requested features in just over a month, and has made so many other significant additions, bug fixes, and changes – including a new epilogue for one character – that *Baldur's Gate III* already feels like a notably better game. And we gave it a 97%!

The issue I'm getting at is that it now feels indisputable that the best time to play a game is never the day it launches, but that leaves us with the difficult decision of how long to wait. I'm feeling pretty good about ignoring *Cyberpunk 2077* for three years, since now everyone says it rules after initially complaining that NPCs kept driving into barricades and mysteriously rocketing into the sky. *Baldur's Gate III* feels good to go now, but I'm a little taken aback by how improved my experience has been with my second character, which I started playing after abandoning my original paladin.

**NEED TO KNOW**

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|---|---|
| **RELEASE** Aug 3, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Larian Studios |
| **PUBLISHER** Larian Studios | **LINK** baldursgate3.game |

## BETTER TIME

In part, I'm having a better time just because I know what I'm doing now, but the patches have made a real difference. As one example, all of my companions in my first, unfinished playthrough wanted to make out with me within, like, a day of meeting. I know sex and romance are popular RPG activities, but it made the early game feel more like a reality dating show than a sword and sorcery adventure. That was a bug, it turns out, and my fellow tadpole-brains have been far less eager to ask if I want to get down this time, so the early game no longer feels like I've been helicoptered onto an island by a Netflix producer.

And things that didn't happen the first time are now happening as they should. I've said to myself more than once, "Wait, did this dialogue trigger last time? It makes so much more sense now!"

## ACTION ECONOMY

*Baldur's Gate III* is even more complex than Larian's last game, the great *Divinity: Original Sin 2*, so it's remarkable that it was as coherent as it was at launch, and also remarkable that Larian has managed to patch up so many little rips and tears in its ensemble drama so quickly.

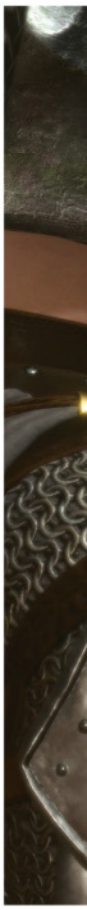
It's such an elaborate game that a lot of the fixes are for bugs I never saw and was never going to see, because I never thought to do whatever peculiar series of actions led to them. My favourite, "If you dismiss your companion to camp and shove them into a chasm, Withers will now be able to resurrect them... so you can shove them into a chasm again, probably."

**THINGS THAT DIDN'T HAPPEN THE FIRST TIME ARE NOW HAPPENING**

## LATER-GAME UPDATES

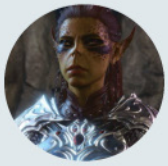
There've also been a bunch of later-game updates that I'll benefit from when I finally make it to *Baldur's Gate III*'s second half. Larian's gone so far as to add a new epilogue for one character after some players expressed disappointment with her possible fates. A PC Gamer writer who's finished *Baldur's Gate III* said that it's the "punk rock conclusion" he desperately wanted for the character – high praise for something dropped into the game less than a month after release.

From here, the *Baldur's Gate III* roadmap includes mod tools and hopefully a vacation for everyone at Larian. There's more bug fixing to do as well – a character's arms and legs turned invisible during a cutscene for me the other day, for example – but I'd struggle to wait for more patches before adventuring on. I guess when a game is good enough, the question isn't "when should I play it?" but "when should I play it again?". I'll just have to make a third character sometime next year – woe is me.



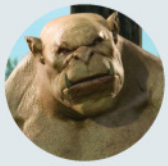
## NOTABLE NOTES

**Baldur's Gate III's *patch notes are a delight so far***



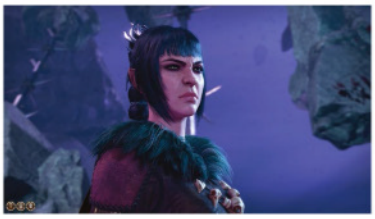
**LAE'ZEL**
"Lae'zel no longer floats up and down during your dialogue discussing dating."

**WYLL**
"Fixed your head clipping into Wyll's as you kiss on the ground."



**OGRE**
"You can now opt to respect the privacy of the bugbear and the ogre..."

**DOG**
"Fixed Scratch's position so you can try to get that ball out of his mouth."



**ABOVE:** "Please... just let me flay your mind, bro."

**LEFT:** Everyone's favourite tiefling already has a new ending.

**BELOW:** No, I swear, I haven't just been using you for Guidance.

# STARFIELD

## Bethesda's RPG has lots of mods. *By Christopher Livingston*

**It's not that we weren't expecting modders to immediately blast off into *Starfield* or anything... but golly! Just a few weeks after Bethesda's space RPG launched, there aren't just hundreds of mods for *Starfield*. There are thousands. Thousands! And if the *Elder Scrolls* and *Fallout* games are any indication, there will be thousands more by the end of the year and tens of thousands in the years ahead.**

That's just fine, because Bethesda's biggest RPG ever has plenty of room for improvement. There's a ton of jank on display in *Starfield*, a few bugs here and there, some pesky UI issues, a few systems that could use improving, and overall just lots of little minor annoyances that can be solved by modders. Thankfully, they're not wasting any time.

**NEED TO KNOW**

| | |
|---|---|
| **RELEASE** Sept 6, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Bethesda Game Studios |
| **PUBLISHER** Bethesda Softworks | **LINK** bethesda.net |

### NICE VIEW

As you begin playing *Starfield* one of the first issues you'll come across is the less-than-stellar inventory screen, which seems to have been designed to show off a huge, lovely 3D model of every item but not to actually help you manage all your stuff in a useful way. For a game in which you spend a good amount of time going through your belongings, ship's cargo, vendor inventory, and your companion's pockets, the inventory system is almost shockingly bad. So, it's not a surprise that's one of the first things modders started tinkering with. Your best

**ABOVE:** Less clutter! On your screen, that is. Your place will still be a mess.

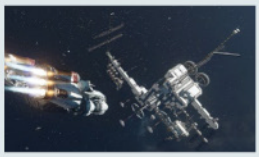
**BELOW:** Mods let you craft ammo for your favourite guns.

## MOD SQUAD

*More mods we'd love to see*

**SURVIVAL MODE**
Where we're stranded on a planet without a ship, and have to harvest resources and survive.

**RIDEABLE ALIEN CRITTERS**
Look, they're fun to shoot, but every game should have a mount.



**WE CAN BUILD SHIPS**
But what we really want to build is our own orbiting space station.

**A WHOLE NEW PLANET BUILT BY MODDERS**
I hope they surprise us with volcanoes and intelligent aliens!

**ABOVE:** Tired of landing sequences? Skip right over 'em.

**RIGHT:** Bethesda finally got ladders working. Modders made them better.

option right now for a better inventory is a mod called *StarUI* by m8r98a4f2. It's not quite as accomplished as the excellent *SkyUI* for *Skyrim* or DEF_UI for *Fallout 4*, but it's a great start, giving a more compact view of your inventory, claiming lots of that empty space in the middle of the screen, and allowing for more choice in which details are shown, like item rarity, in addition to just weight and value. The mod also lets you see how much of an item you have in your inventory when you're buying from a vendor, which is especially useful when stocking up on ammo or resources. It's one of those mods that's filled with common sense tweaks and improvements that make you wonder: how does a developer work on a game for a decade and not include these features themselves?

Speaking of decluttering your screen, the inventory isn't the only thing that needs a little work. If you're not a fan of having the sight of the Kreet Research Lab you just discovered obscured by the words "KREET RESEARCH LAB LOCATION DISCOVERED" ten feet tall on your screen, you might want to try a mod called *BetterHUD* by KhaoMaat. It moves location text information down to the bottom of the screen instead of smack-dab on top of the location you're trying to look at, and shrinks it so it's not screaming at your eyes. It also moves the XP notification from the middle of your screen – a terrible place for it to be – to the lower edge, so you can see it but it's not right in the way. The mod also has some nice options to remove enemy health bars and hit markers if you want a more subtle and immersive combat experience.

### GOING UP

Sometimes a mod just makes you shake your head. After a couple decades of research, Bethesda finally figured out the elusive magic of working ladders, and it's somewhat delightful to actually climb a ladder from one level of your spaceship to another. But... after all that time, it turns out climbing ladders gets old pretty darn quick because it just takes too much time. *Simply Faster Ladders* is a mod that fixes the ladders it took Bethesda so long to master, making them much quicker to climb. Another thing a lot of players quickly got sick of is the sheer number of cinematics you have to endure while jet-setting around the galaxy. Taking off, landing, grav-jumping, docking, it gets a bit tiresome sitting through all those scenes again and again, so the *Ship Skip* mod skips 'em, giving you a quick loading screen instead.

### FASTER AIRLOCK

Ladders aren't the only things players want sped up. The *Faster Airlock and Hatch Animations* mod by DankRafft will let you spend a lot less time waiting for doors to open. The really nice thing about the mod is it's completely customisable, so if you enjoy the animation of the airlocks cycling and opening you don't have to lose them completely. You can choose from eight different speeds ranging anywhere from just a little bit faster to twice or five times as fast, or even instant-open.

**SOMETIMES A MOD JUST MAKES YOU SHAKE YOUR HEAD**

There are also a few mods that actually monkey around with some of *Starfield*'s systems. In this case, a handy system from *Fallout* is brought into *Starfield*: the ability to craft your own ammo. The *Craftable Ammo and Utilities* mod by pitufocabeza is a welcome addition, especially if you're tired of scouring every dealer and store for rarer ammo types like 40mm explosive rounds or 44 ultramag. And now you have something useful to craft with all those space minerals you've been gathering. Even better, the mod allows you to craft other items like medpacks and digipicks. With a mod this useful you'll never have to visit a store again.

### ACHIEVEMENT UNLOCKED

And if you like playing with mods but don't like that playing with mods means you can't get achievements, my final recommendation is a mod called *Achievement Enabler*. Using this mod re-enables the achievements that are disabled when you use mods. How does that even work? I think it's magic. Space magic. ■

# GET STARTED IN STARFIELD

Take to the skies with these galaxy brain tips. *By Sean Martin*

**NEED TO KNOW**

**DIFFICULTY**
Easy

**TIME**
10 hours

**VITAL LINKS**

**Best mods:**
shorturl.at/pqJKT

**Console commands:**
shorturl.at/qP568

**All the guides you need:**
shorturl.at/xCI08

## STRONG START

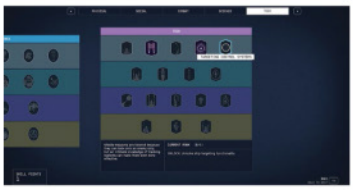
1 Do you want an endless parade of bounty hunters chasing you? Origin Traits are an important narrative element of your playthrough, so be sure to pick wisely. It's worth remembering that many Origin Traits can also be disabled if they get annoying. Take a hike, fan!

## PRACTICAL KNOW HOW

2 While it can be fun to choose your Background based on an imagined backstory, it's more important to pick practically here, since it alters your skillset and what you'll be able to do in space. Some skills are definitely more useful than others, such as Piloting.

## BOOST PACK

3 Speaking of useful skills; make sure to grab the Boost Pack Training ability as soon as you can. *Starfield* doesn't explain this, but if you don't have that skill, you can't use your Boost Pack at all, making it a lot harder to traverse areas while exploring.



## LOCK AND LOAD

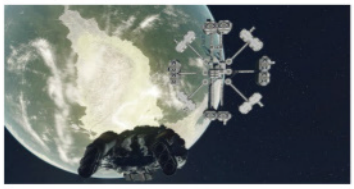
4 If you want to be a sinister pirate, stealing ships from spacefaring folk, then unlock Targeting Control Systems in the Tech skill tree. Once you lock on to an enemy ship, this skill gives you the ability to target their engines, disabling them so you can board.

## DIGIPICKS

5 Unlike the lockpicks from *Skyrim*, Digipicks are used to both open doors and hack terminals, and so you burn through them very quickly – especially if you find the minigame to be a challenge. Be sure to buy them from vendors whenever you can.

## FLOG YOUR JUNK

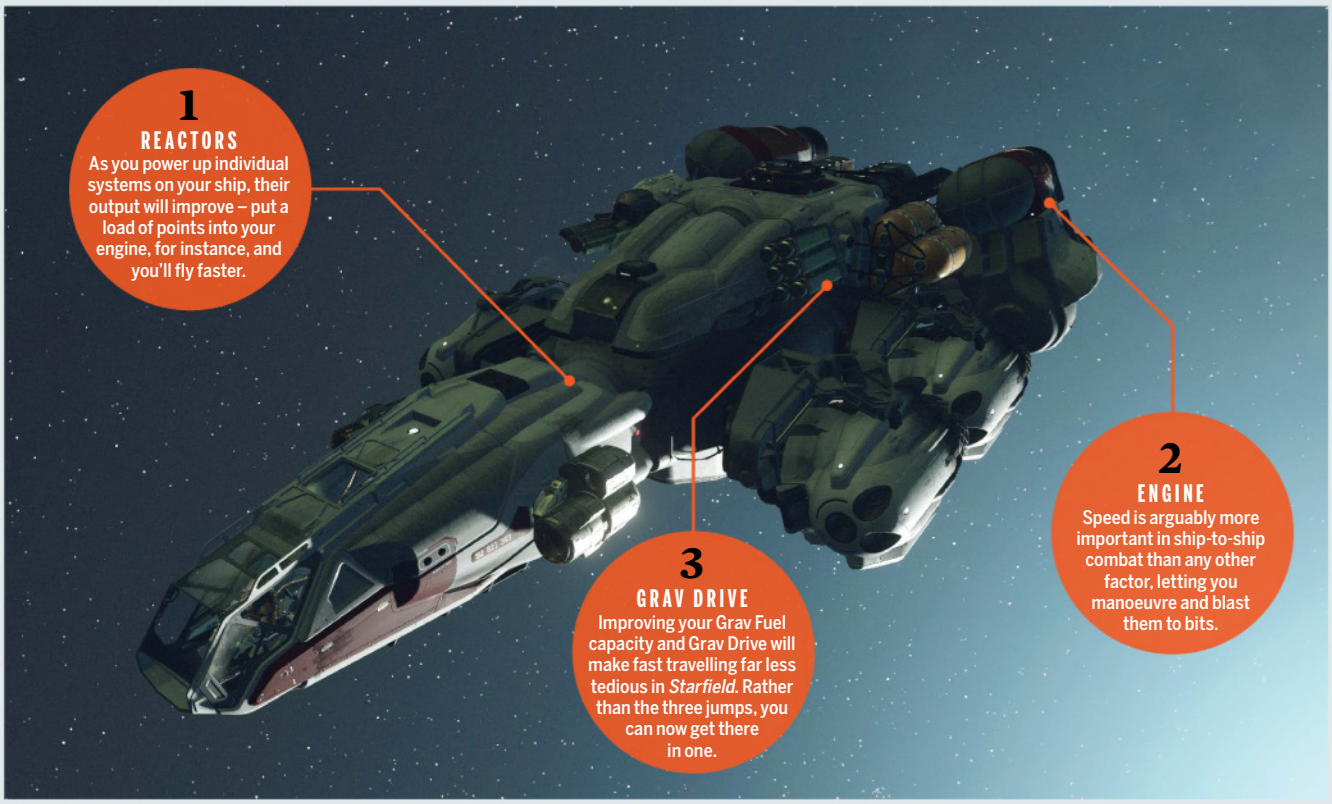
6 You pick all sorts of space junk while travelling the galaxy, so offload it when you can by visiting the Trade Authority terminals near the ship salesman in each major spaceport. You can sell directly from your cargo hold.



## HOLD IT

7 Your ship's hold is the ideal storage area for spare weapons and suits, but you can also loot the cargo holds of other ships when you board them, along with the captain's stash. This is generally where the credits are stowed, so clean it out while you can.

## SHIP SHAPE *Three big upgrades for interstellar ease*



### LIGHT IT UP

8 You'll frequently find yourself in dark and dingy abandoned outposts and bases across the stars, so don't forget that you have a torch to make getting around easier. Just hold F to toggle it on and off. There are some pretty wild skins you can add.

### SUITS YOU

9 Tired of zooming out on a habitable planet only to realise you're still wearing your spacesuit? If you head to the inventory menu and find your spacesuit, you can toggle it to appear on or off in settlements, which can help you feel a little more normal when walking around.

### GET A GUN

10 Melee kind of sucks in *Starfield*. You only really have one attack until you unlock more skills, and it takes a lot of investment to make hand-to-hand combat viable. Instead, grab a gun of your choosing and save yourself the pain of trying to whack someone with an axe.

### FACTION FRIENDS

11 If you're feeling a little lost in terms of what to do first, find a faction to befriend. Just like in the Fighters or Mages guilds in *The Elder Scrolls*, faction questlines are a fantastic way to get new weapons, ships and generally puzzle out your place in the big ol' universe.

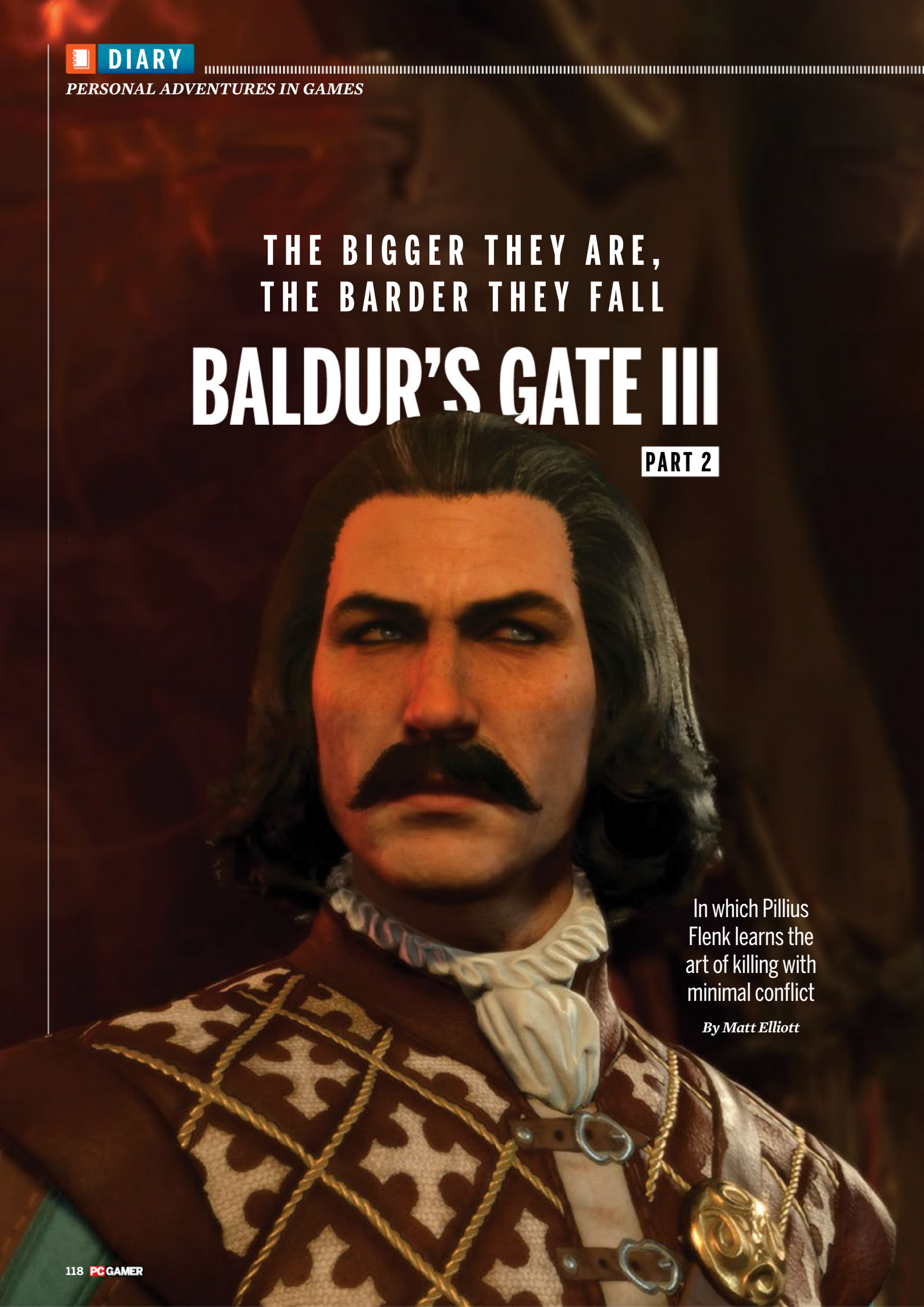
### CAREFUL WITH CONTRABAND

12 While exploring some den, you may find an item with an absurdly high value; this is most likely Contraband. While you can sell it to the Trade Authority, you'll get scanned and arrested before you land in any major system.

# THE BIGGER THEY ARE, THE BARDER THEY FALL

# BALDUR'S GATE III

## PART 2



In which Pillius Flenk learns the art of killing with minimal conflict

*By Matt Elliott*

**When we last saw Pillius Flenk, he was allowing his bravado to write cheques his conflict-avoidant ass was unlikely to cash. By agreeing to help everyone he sashayed into after escaping the crashing nautiloid, he got himself into something of a pickle, especially since he had no genuine intention of acting heroically. Via a combination of over-promising, under-delivering and avoiding physical exertion, he reached a point where his only option was to creep into a goblin stronghold to rescue a druid; an unwelcome task for a man less courageous than Donald Trump on a polished staircase. Flenk, you'll remember, is a mewling weakling with the fortitude of a sugar sculpture on a drizzly day; a prey animal, albeit one who wants you to believe that he's a actually a snarling alpha.**

People are expecting great things from Pillius and he cannot disappoint his audience. And it's with this unwelcome thought in mind that he assembles his fellowship. There's Astarion, a fellow roguish cad (or caddish rogue); Shadowheart, for whom Flenk feels a suppressed flaming ardour; and Gale, who is only here because we haven't found Lae'zel and Wyll makes Flenk feel bad about his lacking rapier skills. Our band of poorly optimised adventurers sets off on a quest to find Halsin, with little more than hope, healing potions, and a selection of songs that my companions must be sick of.

It isn't long before we chance upon our foes. The team enter a goblin cave and hear them talking about torturing a druid. We tread carefully; this must be the place. Flenk sneaks ahead heroically, if such a concept isn't oxymoronic, and seizes his chance. A life of secret cowardice has prepared Flenk for this. While his companions aren't looking, he turns himself invisible and shoves the goblin guard over a ledge to his death. It's the kind of battle Pillius was born for; one that's over before his opponents even realise they're being attacked. The goblin's associates join the battle, but Flenk has gone to the back of the pack for another rendition of The Queen's High Seas. Suspiciously, the fight ends quickly.

It turns out this is because this isn't the stronghold at all, merely a cave with some goblins in it. The true task lies further ahead, and it promises to be significantly more challenging. We sneak into a town watched by a goblin vanguard, and Flenk climbs a ladder, ready to implement 'shove and flee: part 2'. Somewhat unexpectedly, though, he ends up in a conversation with his quarry. It's here that Flenk has his first taste of his Illithid powers, which allow him to mentally dominate weak-minded adversaries. It's exceedingly useful, but I also don't want to become reliant upon it. Yes, Flenk will do anything to avoid a fight. But a true bard doesn't require the edge offered by infernal powers; instead they succeed through the power of poetry, performance, and pushing people off ledges when they're not looking. There are some depths, apparently, that even a rogue like Pillius Flenk won't plumb.

**THERE ARE SOME DEPTHS THAT EVEN A ROGUE LIKE PILLIUS FLENK WON'T PLUMB**

Whatever the method, deception turns out to be something Flenk is genuinely brilliant at. It's quite satisfying avoiding fights, and it's something my ragtag associates seem to admire. Shadowheart and Gale because they seem decent, and Astarion because he too likes the smell of his own bullshit. This in itself feels like a very Pillius Flenk situation. Yes, my party composition could be better. But all that matters is being surrounded by people who'll constantly heap praise on their flamboyant party leader, and Flenk's current teammates seem to celebrate his charming cowardice.

## THAT'S YOUR CLOT

Our party dynamic isn't without its problems. One night, Flenk awakes to find Astarion bearing down on him like a plump pug atop half a sausage roll. Pillius is shocked to learn that his fellow rogue is a vampire, desperate for blood. After some discussion, Flenk decides to let him have a few gulps of the bard stuff, partly to improve his mood and fighting abilities, and partly because Flenk is such a despicable people pleaser he'll literally let another man drain his vital essences. I even feel slightly rude using a persuasion test to stop Astarion from draining him dry. And, sure enough, the next day Flenk is afflicted with the Bloodless debuff, as a constant and humiliating reminder of his acquiescence. Still, at least Astarion seems chipper.

On a related note, the tactic of shameless appeasement is working so far. We haven't had to fight anyone. Our team discovers some goblins torturing a gnome tied to a windmill. Flenk normally wouldn't intervene, but, swollen with self-confidence, he charms his way to saving the gnome, in an almost vulgar display of his coercive power. These actions also ingratiate him to Shadowheart; something which is gradually creeping up his priority list.

### THE RULES

1. You need to be adored. Say yes to everything.
2. Do everything possible to avoid actual physical confrontation.
3. Thrill your party by performing a song during every fight.

My reward for a life led despicably: fat stacks of glimmering gold.

## SPOOR WORKMANSHIP

We reach the goblin outpost, and Flenk yet again charms his way past the sentries. This time, however, there's a snag. While dealing with a faecally-fixated sentinel called Olak, Pillius is faced with a miserable conundrum: fight his way into the compound or smear literal shit all over his face. This is obviously a cruel hazing ritual, like plumbers telling the work experience boy to ask for fallopian tubing at the hardware store. In any other playthrough I'd fling the faeces back in Olak's face and fight my way through, dignity intact. But that's not how Pillius Flenk rolls. Faced with no other option, our gallant hero takes the bold choice of rubbing worg dung into his magnificent countenance. As anyone who's experienced it will tell you, it's incredibly difficult to get excrement out of lustrous facial hair. Worse still, the humiliation extends to my character's appearance, meaning that Flenk appears in every cutscene with a face like he's been bobbing for sweetcorn at a sewage farm. Asterion understandably, disapproves. Hopefully it has quenched his thirst.

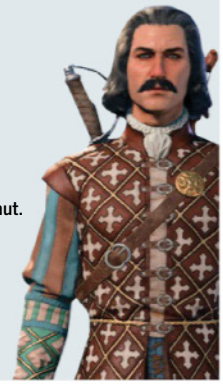
As disgusting as this obviously is, it does mean that we've progressed into the goblin camp without conflict. Upon our arrival, we're met by something that chills Flenk to the marrow: his not-as-talented bard associate, Volo, is being held captive by the goblins and forced to perform. The goblins obviously see him as some sort of theatrical novelty, with his new owner, Gribbo, referring to him as a "pigeon". Displaying any sort of theatrical acumen here would be to risk the same fate as poor Volo. And yet, Flenk cannot resist. Performance is everything, and he must captivate his public, however repellent and tasteless they may be. And so, caked in shit, Flenk proceeds to have an epic rap shat-battle with Volo. Pillius' rhymes are so fearsome it actually ends up breaking the other bard, and Gribbo sends him back to his cage in disgrace. I'm sure this will lead to something fortuitous eventually, because that's how *Baldur's Gate* tends to work. But right now all Flenk cares about is proving himself to be the more talented wordsmith.

We enter the Shattered Sanctum, a ravaged underground temple that the goblins have occupied. It's a complete hovel. There are torture racks, wicked ceremonies, and caged captives everywhere. It's also crammed with potential enemies who, thankfully, aren't currently interested in fighting us. After some time spent exploring I discover that Halsin is being held, in bear form, in the worg pens. Nothing about this sounds ideal. That's a lot of feral animals, none of which can be lulled into submission by a lilting tune or cunningly observed rhyming couplet. Flenk tries to charm his way past the guards by discussing our shared love of throwing sharp stones at bears, but this just enrages Halsin, who bursts out of his pen and attacks. Happily, he's on my side. It's far more like an actual fight than I'd like, but the goblins go down without too much resistance, and we heroically kill the ones fleeing to raise the alarm. Halsin is free, and nobody who matters is dead. Now all we need to do is sneak back to the enclave. Right?

Wrong. Halsin wants Flenk to kill all the goblin leaders before he'll leave. Now, Flenk isn't an expert at murder, but he does know it's quite difficult to kill people without some small amount of fighting. Worse still, it's pretty obvious that anyone in charge of an army of goblins is a) probably quite good at combat and b) surrounded by armed goblins. The new mission is clear, then. Find the leaders. And kill them with as little danger to his person as humanly possible.

### TUNE!

***The Ballad of Pillius Flenk***



Cunningly, brave Flenk did creep,
Though drained of blood while he did sleep!

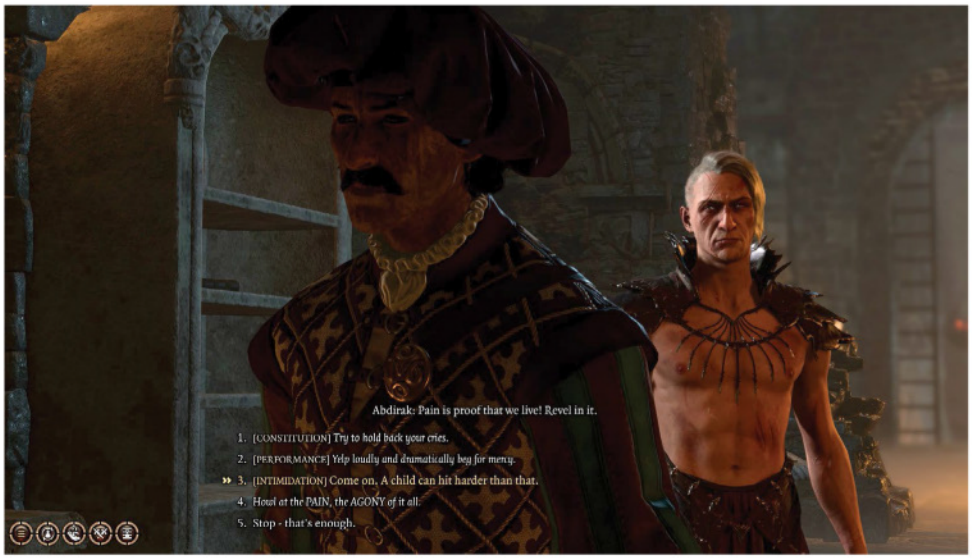
At goblin guards he doffed his hat,
While his moustache was thick with scat.

He charmed the goblin known as Gut,
Whose brand made shadowed hearts snap shut.

He used his skills to fool a drow,
She met her doom, no romance now.

Dror felt safe upon his throne,
Till fiery blasts rent flesh from bone.

A tale of dash, handsomely told!
Flenk lost the girl but claimed the gold.




**BELOW:** No, I will not be explaining this screenshot at this time.

## GET GUT

First up is Priestess Gut, an objectionable religious leader who acts as the spiritual voice of the Absolute. After some preliminary banter, Flenk wins her over by agreeing to be branded. It's a difficult choice, since branding hurts and it'll desecrate Flenk's delicate hands. He agrees and we retire to her chambers to discuss matters, where we quickly kill Gut in a brutal, one-on-four mugging. It's only afterwards that I realise that Shadowheart has gone off me because of the brand, and that I could quite easily have sent another party member in to get branded instead. I could save scum, but it feels against the spirit of things, even playing as a rogue. Onwards.

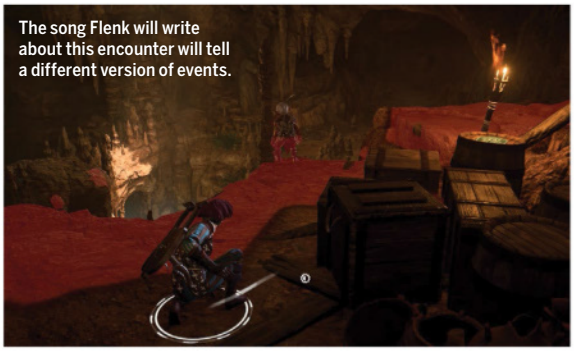
Next is a drow named Minthara, who seems slightly sharper than the

## AFTERWARDS I REALISE THAT SHADOWHEART HAS GONE OFF ME BECAUSE OF THE BRAND

dearly departed Gut. She does, however, have a weakness to Flenk's superpower: total bullshit. We discuss plans and Flenk agrees to lead her to Emerald Grove and help kill everyone. Convinced she's made an equally monstrous and dangerously handsome comrade-in-arms, Minthara struts off to get ready. And, in doing so, makes the mistake of crossing a rickety bridge. Flenk seizes the opportunity to be cowardly, and shoots the struts supporting the structure, sending Minthara plummeting into the void below. It's less than ideal, because I don't get to loot her valuable corpse, but it's extremely on brand.

Finally, we have Dror Ragzlin, the head hobgoblin. This one is trickier. He's surrounded by bodyguards and out in the open. But Flenk has a plan. In a room, tucked away in a dark corner of the sanctum, is a stash of explosive barrels. It takes some time, but one by one the team leap into the room, load up with the barrels, and carry them to the hobgoblin leader. He doesn't seem to mind or notice when we surround his throne with conspicuous explosive devices. Nor does he notice when we ascend the ladder into the rafters, and, from a safe distance, proceed to blow him and his followers into oblivion. I'm not even sure if the explosion kills Dror, because he goes flying through the air and disappears down a conveniently placed hole. Whatever the cause, he's definitely dead, and Flenk didn't even need to draw his rapier. It's a simple job finishing off the rest of his half-burned entourage, especially from the comparative safety of the rafters. Halsin helps save Emerald Grove, Kagha gets a stern telling off, and all Pillius Flenk needed to do was lug explosives, get branded, lie to some goblins, and smear worg dung on his face. Perhaps, in hindsight, fighting would have been easier. ■

**ABOVE:** It's impossible not to read this option in the voice of a grumpy dinner lady.



# TRANQUILITY LANE

The best quest in Fallout 3 (not counting DLC). *By Jody Macgregor*

**LEFT:** Bring up your Pip-Boy and you'll see this novelty wristwatch.

**RIGHT:** Your first glimpse of what's to come.

**People will tell you the best part of Bethesda RPGs is the sidequests, and sometimes that's true. But one of the most Wild Wasteland moments in *Fallout 3* is part of the main storyline, sitting right there on the critical path.**

Your quest in *Fallout 3* is to find your dad, Liam Neeson. It's a better hook for an open-world game than the search for your son in *Fallout 4*, because everyone knows Liam Neeson can take care of himself. Bouncing across the Capital Wasteland, you're free to take your time safe in the knowledge you can return to Dad Quest later on.

You finally track the deadbeat down to Vault 112, where you expect some kind of dungeon crawl, maybe a fight with some mutants or vault dwellers. You find something else.

## THUS DID TRANQUO

Vault 112's inhabitants have spent the last 200 years in a simulation, bodies suspended while their minds experience a series of pleasant virtual realities. Your dad went in to talk to the scientist who built it, Stanislaus Braun, and the only way to get him out is to follow. As the headset lowers over your face, the familiar loading screen message "PLEASE STAND BY" appears, to be replaced by the sedate black-and-white street called Tranquility Lane.

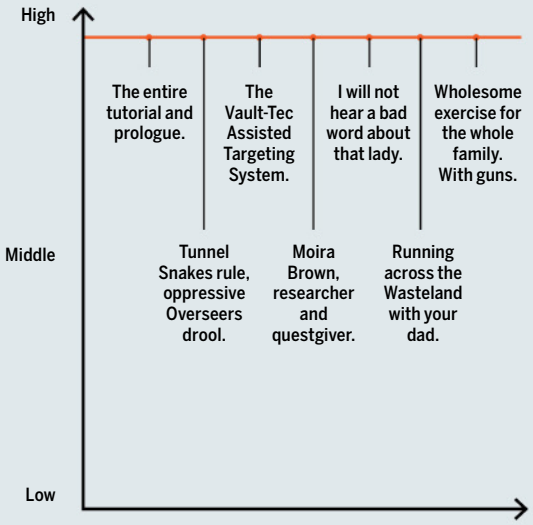
In this white-picket-fence American dream, *Fallout 3* becomes an episode of The Twilight Zone. While most of the residents are ignorant of their true nature, playing out their good neighbour roles in a place where there was no war and there is no wasteland, one is different. A little girl named Betty, watering flowers with her dog in the middle of the street, is aware of the real world. Her voice slips, becoming that of the elderly scientist Braun, and things get extremely Village of the Damned.

### NEED TO KNOW

| | |
|---|---|
| **RELEASE** Oct 28, 2008 | **DEVELOPER** Bethesda Game Studios |
| **PUBLISHER** Bethesda Softworks | **LINK** fallout.bethesda.net |

## VATS ENTERTAINMENT

*Other high points of Fallout 3*




## BRAUN'S IN CHARGE OF THE SIMULATION, A VIRTUAL GOD, AND IT'S GONE TO HIS HEAD

Braun's in charge of the simulation, a virtual god, and it's gone to his head. He's been tormenting the inhabitants for kicks then resetting reality, over and over, and will only hand over your dear old dad if you take part in his twisted game. You're a child too in the simulation, which makes it even more messed up when Braun's game escalates. The first task is making a boy cry; by the end you're committing atrocities.

## STEPFORD LIVES

*Fallout* is at its best when it's offering multiple solutions to quests, letting you write your personality across its design. The first two games had three solutions for almost every problem, but *Fallout 3* often reduces that to good karma and bad karma. In Tranquility Lane, there are still good and bad karma options, but the bad karma ones branch like arteries.

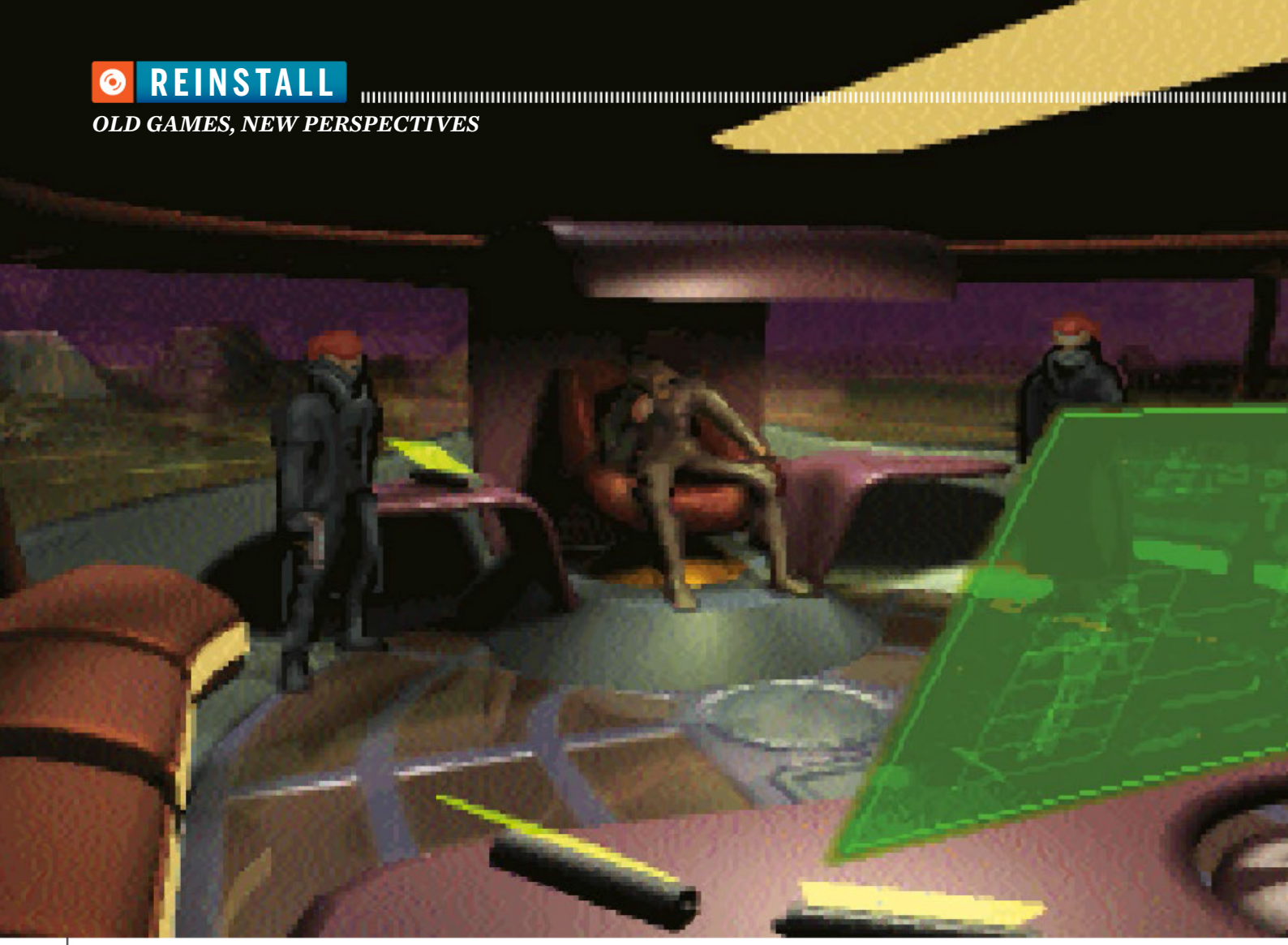
When Braun tells you to murder Mabel, it's suddenly a *Hitman* level in miniature, her house overflowing with deathtraps. You can sabotage a chandelier to fall on her, or go full Looney Tunes with a roller skate at the top of the stairs. You can talk to the neighbours to learn she loves to bake pies, then rig her gas oven to explode. Or you can hack her house's security to lock the doors and turn her Mr Handy robot hostile, then evade the thing while it flamethrowers and saws her to death.

*Fallout* is a black comedy from the moment you see US soldiers gunning down Canadians in the street during the first game's intro, but that dark sense of humour was lost in the sequel. Tranquility Lane brings it back. I can't help but laugh when I'm the Pint-Sized Slasher. The jaunty music, the bright surroundings, the clown mask, all absurdly contrasted with the simulated citizens as they come apart at the joints just like the raiders you shoot for the other 50 hours you spend in *Fallout 3*.

"Wasn't it fun?" Braun asks afterwards. Sure it was. I was killing people in a videogame, that's what I signed up for. The good karma choice is to activate a failsafe that kills the residents in real life, ending their torment while leaving Braun alone in this hell of his own making. Which is the darkest option yet. There's no way out of Tranquility Lane without blood on your hands. ■

**LEFT:** Mr Handy, what have you done?

**RIGHT:** This gnome has seen some shit.



# SYNDICATE

## Playing Bullfrog's tactical masterpiece after 30 years out of the boardroom. *By Ian Evenden*

**S*yndicate* is a game that stirs strong feelings within me, and the realisation that it's now 30 years old plunged me into a pit of nostalgia for my teenage years.**

I've owned *Syndicate* four times, and played it on three different platforms. Three were on PC, the game coming as a selection of floppies in a big black box with a bright green sheath around it, then a CD-ROM in a small green cardboard case, then as a download in its *Syndicate Plus* incarnation. Only the last one still works. I also played it on the Amiga 500, and later the PSP port of the Super Nintendo conversion as part of the dreadful EA Replay disc. It's a game that's most at home on PC, however, as even in 1993 the MS-DOS version was better than those seen on the Amiga and Atari ST.

For the sake of clarity, we're talking about *Syndicate* the Bullfrog cyberpunk tactics game. Not the 2012 Starbreeze FPS of the same name whose main character, Miles Kilo, sounds like the friendly face of a '70s animation explaining why the switch to the metric system isn't scary rather than a cybernetically enhanced agent of corporate terror. That game is, however, notable for the voice of Succession's Brian Cox as a CEO who prefers to dish out trauma ballistically rather than generationally.

When you're 14, you haven't seen Blade Runner and The Matrix hasn't been invented yet, the idea of cybernetic agents in trenchcoats walking into a near-future city and setting fire to its inhabitants seems impossibly cool. The intro to 1996 sequel *Syndicate Wars* captured it best, unaware civilians living in an illusory world of sunny tree-lined avenues with friendly police while, in reality, there are cybernetic killers with miniguns on the streets. The cops are masked stormtroopers. And it's raining.

*Syndicate*'s intro is a simpler thing, though it's aged better as its characters don't appear to be made out of plasticine. It tells the tale of a capture operation, a potential agent (known as BOB after the game's internal development title at Bullfrog) run down, bundled into a car and turned into a cyborg. I thought my PC couldn't handle it at

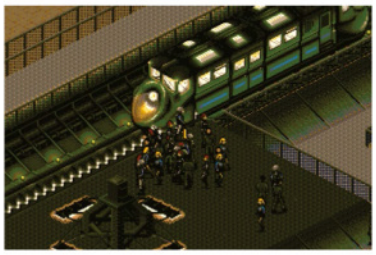
### NEED TO KNOW

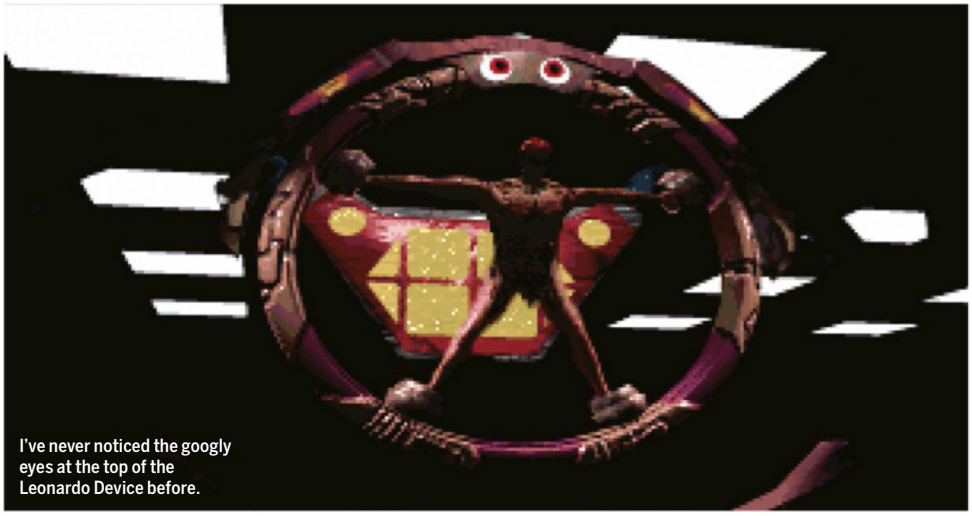
**RELEASE**
June 6, 1993

**DEVELOPER**
Bullfrog Productions

**PUBLISHER**
Electronic Arts

**LINK**
gog.com





I've never noticed the googly eyes at the top of the Leonardo Device before.

**ABOVE:** Some levels have trains you can catch. They'll run you over just as easily though.

**RIGHT:** Flamers and lasers can cause explosive car-nage.

## REIGN OF FIRE

### *Playing* Syndicate *on modern PCs*

*Syndicate* got a spiritual sequel in 2015 in the form of *Satellite Reign*, a game co-created by one of the original team behind *Syndicate Wars* at Bullfrog, and which also shared the '90s games' composer.

It's probably a better match for modern systems, and is extremely Blade Runner, taking *Syndicate*'s isometric look and turning the sliders marked 'neon' and 'rain' to their maximum. There's four-player co-op too, which is a great addition to the game.

If you've got a disc copy of the game laying around, you can also try out FreeSynd on SourceForge. It's a game engine recreation of the original that requires the game's data files to run. It's also a labour of love project that's been on hold for four years and never reached version 1.0, but it's nice that it exists.

the time, such was the jerkiness as the camera rose over the West Gate to show the Eurocorp building beyond. It's good to see it's still choppy 30 years later, on a significantly more powerful AMD APU, and my 386SX is vindicated.

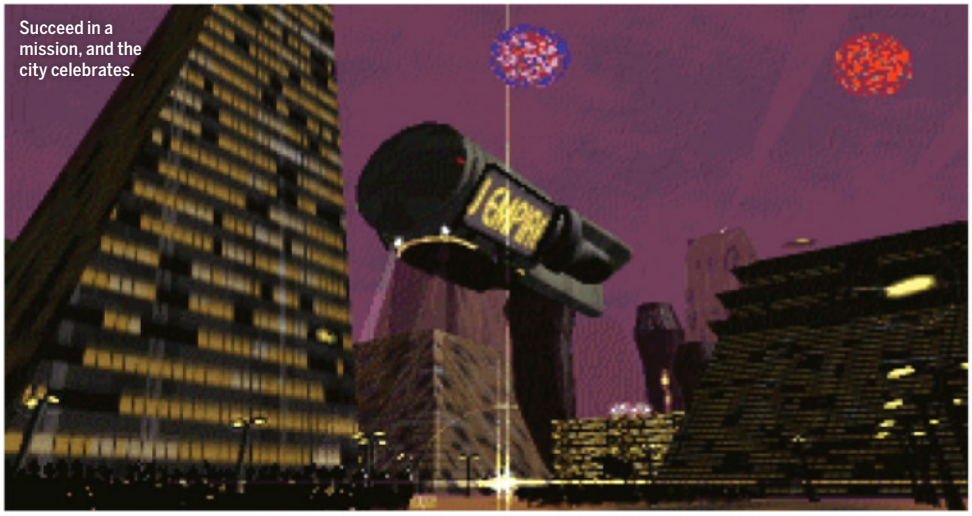
## A NEW EMPIRE

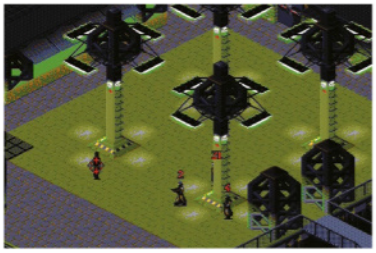
And then it all comes rushing back, like a blast of perception drugs to the brain. The futuristic green interface that appears to be projected into the air on a monitor made of jelly you can throw a lamp through. The

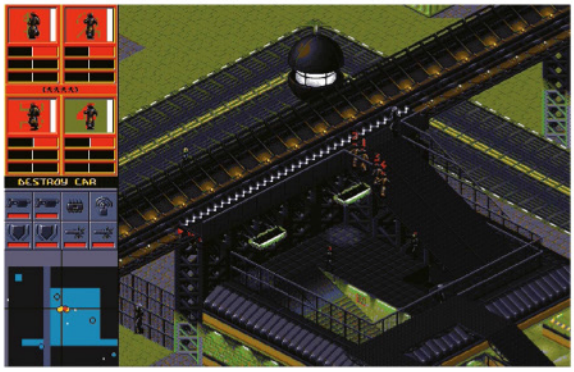
## IT ALL COMES RUSHING BACK, LIKE A BLAST OF PERCEPTION DRUGS TO THE BRAIN

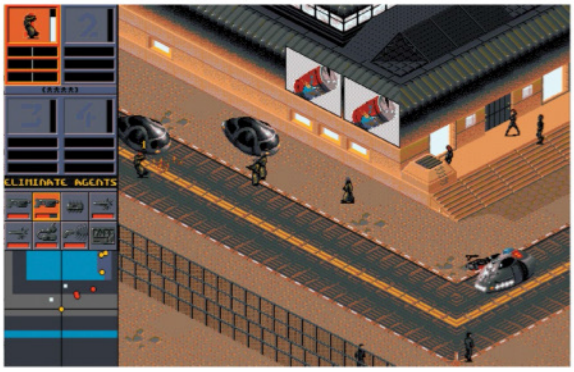
screen in which you dress naked cybernetic operatives in their finest upgraded body parts. And the map, broken up into zones of corporate control. Countries flash when a mission is available so you, the skybound marketing director, can extend the benevolent influence of your corporation by means of rocket launcher-assisted assassination, hails of bullets and injecting people with mind-controlling drugs. The robotic voice that says "syndicate" every time you click on the interface during a mission can get in the bin, though.

One of my favourite missions is the combat sweep in the Urals, which drops not too long after the beginning of the game. You start on top of a building, moving down to the ground to explore – the maps are 2D, but with enough of a 3D effect to make you believe there are different levels. The enemy agents are ready for you, and come running armed with Uzis. There's only eight of them, but if you're not prepared the hail of






**ABOVE:** Weirdly, all your agents seem to have ginger hair.

**LEFT:** Blade Runner-esque animated adverts fill the cities, but it's not dark enough for them to really shine

short-range automatic fire can seriously inconvenience your agents. You'll have the Uzi yourself by this point, there's one on the very first mission you can pick up, but there's a better choice for quick agent kills. The shotgun, a starting weapon, is ferociously powerful but has an even shorter range, meaning you have to play cat and mouse around the buildings to get them with a blast.

## PERSUADE THIS

But there is another tactic. You'll need to buy a Persuadertron early in the game, and taking it to the Urals or nearby Siberia is a quick way to increase your stock of cyborgs. The Persuadertron works by shooting civilians, guards, police and even enemy agents full of drugs that turn them to your side, and is used to kidnap staff from rival corporations. It's also a hilarious way to cheese through a mission with a private army, as persuaded civvies will pick up dropped guns and go to war on your behalf. At first, you can persuade normal people easily, but to capture an enemy agent requires you to have drugged 32 pedestrians first. Upgrade your agents' brains, and this requirement drops.

So entering the Urals with a V3 brain upgrade and a Persuadertron means you need only persuade a few civilians, then you can start working your magic on the enemy agents and fill your ranks with another corporation's expensive operatives.

## ANATOMY OF AN AGENT

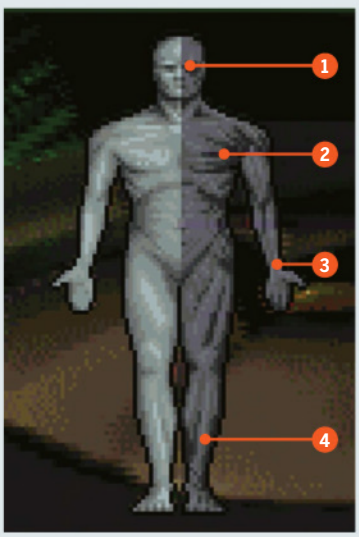
*The leg bone connected to the metal hip bone*

**1 EYES** New peepers mean night vision and targeting improvements.

**2 CHEST** Upgrade this to gain regenerating health and better all-round toughness.

**3 METAL ARMS** Increased carrying capacity for weapons is the reward for cutting your agents' fleshy arms off.

**4 LEGS** A pair of new pins makes you walk faster.




And you can always push the region into revolt by raising its taxes so you can play the mission again if you fancy some more.

## SQUAD TACTICS

If you read the level briefings, it sounds like you're expected to split your squads up, keeping some agents outside the city for backup should things go awry, or even carrying out missions with a single agent. This would be vastly improved if it were possible to select two or three agents at once, but you're limited to either just one or all four. Those you're not controlling can be given a degree of autonomy using combat drugs, or even put into panic mode – press both mouse buttons at once – if you want them to blaze away at anything that moves. In practice, however, the group button that selects all agents at once suits the game better. Moving your team as a single super-agent, making sure their loadouts are the same so you can pull four of the same weapon for quad damage, is the way I've always played the game, with adrenaline levels set high to increase movement speed.

The other two combat drugs, intelligence and perception, allow you to leave an agent on its own to

That guy on the sidewalk is off to pick up PC Gamer.

defend itself. Putting an agent with V3 upgrades and a full weapon load in panic mode leads to it reacting with speed and accuracy to threats you may not even have seen. The world is viewed from a fixed isometric perspective, just as your controlling business development manager would see from their Zeppelin-based control platform. You can scroll around using the arrow keys, but your view isn't rotatable, which means it's possible for assassination targets and enemy agents to hide behind buildings even though you can see them clearly on the mini-map, leaving you scrubbing the cursor back and forth trying to get it to turn red for a firing solution.

An autonomous agent solves this problem, and you can leave a group of three in a convenient position before using the fourth under your control to pull enemies into a killing zone, though make sure they don't switch to gauss guns – the game's rocket launchers – as they're trigger happy and will burn through a lot of valuable ammunition. The minigun is the classic mid-to-late-game weapon, once you've upgraded your agents' arms to deal with the weight, as it packs a lot of ammo, has a decent range, and offers enough power to take out an agent in a few shots.

**YOU CAN ALWAYS PUSH THE REGION INTO REVOLT BY RAISING ITS TAXES**

## OPEN FIRE

The game's greatest weapon is the flamer, however. Its incredibly short range is a drawback, but being able to set an enemy on fire before seeing them run screaming across the level as a post-human torch before crumbling into ashes, the weapons they would have dropped immolated with them, is mind-blowing when you're 14 and still raises a smirk 30 years later. It can also fire through doors and fences, and nothing clears a car out quicker, turning it into a burning timebomb that prompts a tactical retreat before it explodes.

*Syndicate Plus*, which contains the *American Revolt* expansion that brought NetBIOS multiplayer to the game, fixes the level select bug from the original which allowed you to play a mission that wasn't available to you yet simply by selecting it and pressing Enter. *American Revolt* also adds a couple of new weapons, including the devastating air strike, and brings 21 extremely tricky missions, even more so than the notorious Atlantic Accelerator combat sweep from the original, which saw the remaining enemy corporations team up against you.

Sadly, the DOSBox GOG version doesn't seem to particularly like running on modern hardware. The resolution or draw mode changes between the menus and the game itself proving too much in fullscreen, the game preferring to run in a very small window (some scaling options are available from the Graphic Mode Setup app, but can give the game a smeary look) that locks the mouse pointer, meaning you have to press the Windows key first if you want to move out of it. You have to be careful when pausing, as pressing Esc results not in a menu but in you immediately quitting (and failing) the active mission. It could do with some quality-of-life updates, if not a complete remaster, but does at least have the grace to quit without asking if you're sure. I'm a mid-level executive in a future cyber-corporation with teams of heavily armed agents under my control. Of course I'm sure. ■

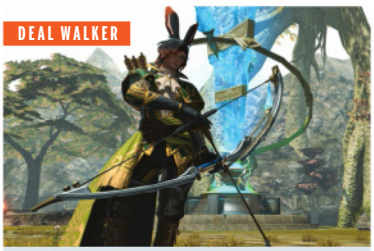
# MUST PLAY

*A PERSONAL LIST OF THE BEST GAMES YOU CAN PLAY RIGHT NOW*

*by Harvey Randall*

HARVEY RANDALL

2023's already been flooded with must-play games – chances are we've nattered your ear off about them already. Instead, here are some games near and dear to my heart that I think you should try.




## FINAL FANTASY XIV

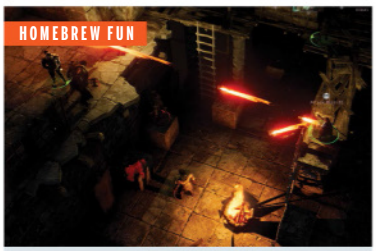
finalfantasyxiv.com

*Final Fantasy XIV: Endwalker* has been a mixed bag, but it's still one of the best RPG stories I've experienced, and you can now play two whole expansions for free. That's like, three 30-40 hour stories for nothing. Well worth a play if you like this sort of thing.

## CYBERPUNK 2077

cyberpunk.net

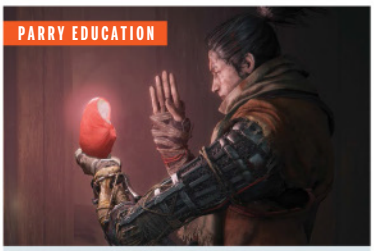
*Cyberpunk*'s rusty launch stopped me from ever trying it. But with *Phantom Liberty*, an RPG systems overhaul, and most performance and bug issues squashed, I gave it a spin. I'm having a blast in Night City throwing knives at people, and I'm so glad I waited this long.




## SOLASTA

solasta-game.com

*Solasta*'s no *Baldur's Gate III*, but it's still really charming. If you're hankering for something after finishing Larian's triumph, you could do far worse. Playing it feels like sitting down with your mates' tabletop campaign – often cheesy, but loads of fun.




## SEKIRO

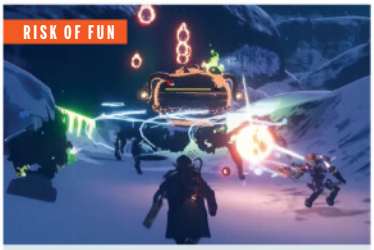
sekirothegame.com

*Sekiro* passed a lot of my friends by, but it has a ton of good ideas, as evidenced by *Lies of P* and *Lords of the Fallen* borrowing from it. Give it another shot with an open mind, and parry 'til your fingers are numb. It's worth it, I promise.

## MIDNIGHT SUNS

midnightsuns.2k.com

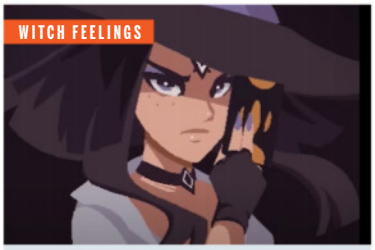
It's a shame this game didn't do better, because it's really great. It's a charmingly-written romp, mixing deck builder gameplay with *XCOM*-style combat. Having everyone go at once stops the turn-based slog common in those games, keeping things snappy.




## RISK OF RAIN 2

riskofrain.com

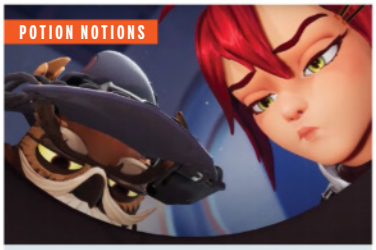
*Risk of Rain 2* still rules. Games like this need to be tough enough to make your eventual god builds feel satisfying, but not so hard as to feel pointless. *Risk* threads that needle, and its DLCs have only built upon a really solid core. I keep redeploying for a reason.




## COSMIC WHEEL SISTERHOOD

cosmicwheelsisterhood.com

This game has so much going for it. The *Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood* lets you design your own tarot deck, then makes you responsible for the futures you foresee. Mostly, I'm just happy indie gems like this still exist among the haze of massive RPGs and the latest live-service soylent.




## POTIONOMICS

potionomics.com

*Potionomics* is just really wonderful. I don't think I've been so wholly charmed by a game before – gorgeous animations, sharp writing, and a unique gameplay loop. *Slay the Spire* style haggling combat with a dash of *Moonlighter* management and lots of townsfolk to date.

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60 YEARS OF PC GAMER SPECIAL

# PC GAMER

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DREAM PREVIEW

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GABE NEWELL'S FROZEN HEAD TALKS GORDON, G-MAN AND TIME-TRAVELLING GONARCH QUEENS

ROMANCE
**FINAL FANTASY XXXI**
LIGHTNING AND CLOUD TO DIVORCE?!

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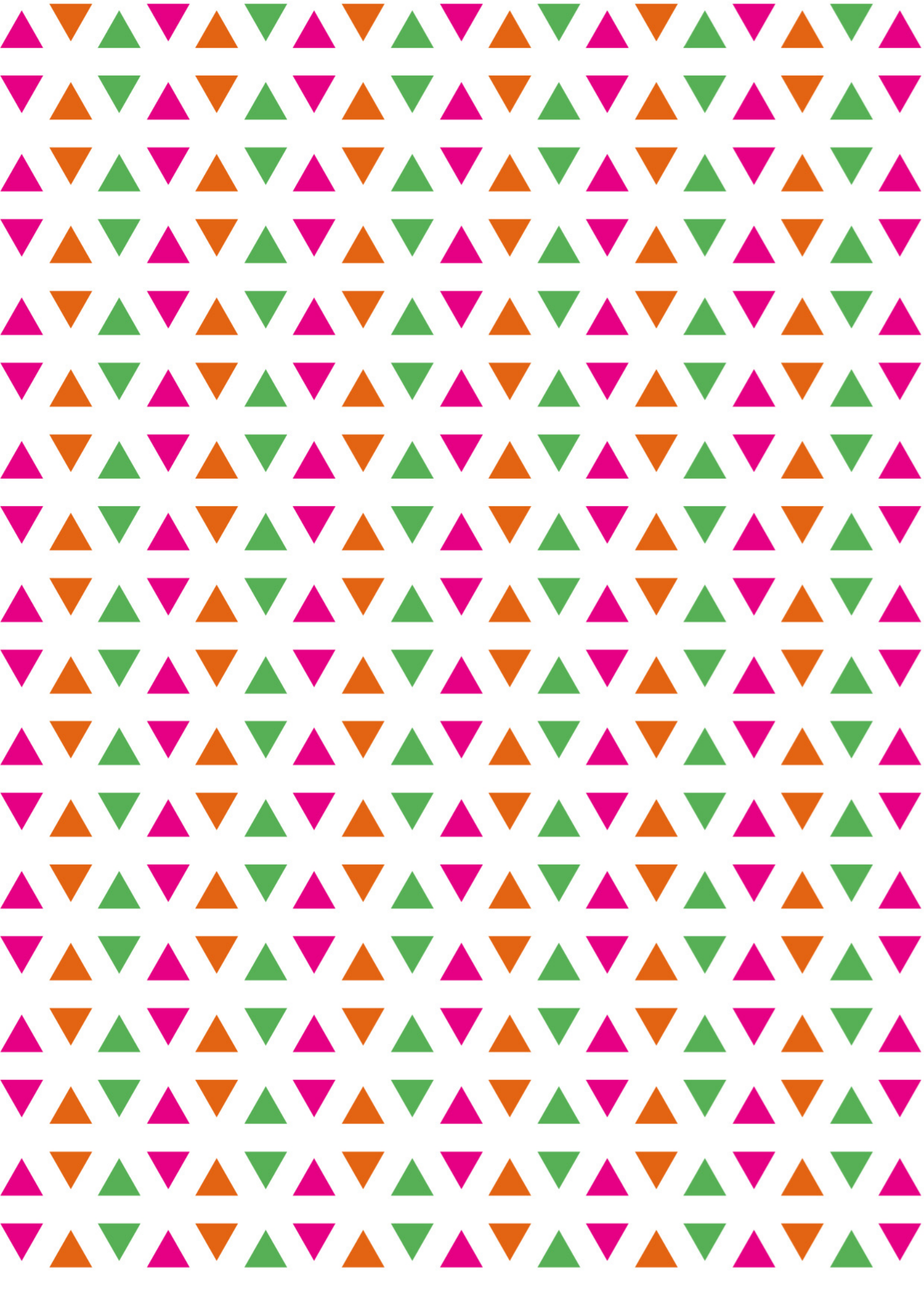
# CELEBRATING **THREE DECADES** OF PC GAMING

PC GAM3R



# "HERE WE LOOK BACK AT 30 GLORIOUS YEARS OF PC GAMING "

**ROBERT JONES**
**Twitter**
@rnicholasj

**This month**
Recalled the joy of PC gaming in the 1990s. Then realised things just kept getting better in every subsequent decade. These are truly great times to be a PC gamer.

PC gaming... it's bloody brilliant isn't it?! And PC Gamer magazine has been in lockstep with its rise and evolution at every point over the last 30 years. We've been there for the dizzying highs as well as the terrible lows, the radical industry shifts and the gradual cultural changes.

As such, on PC Gamer magazine's 30th birthday, we look back on 30 glorious years of PC gaming, from its biggest game releases and most impactful events, through its iconic game-changing hardware and software, and onto its most legendary characters. Enjoy!

**ROBERT JONES**
PRINT EDITOR
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CELEBRATING
**THREE DECADES**
OF PC GAMING

## December 1993

# Doom

**DEVELOPER** ID SOFTWARE **PUBLISHER** IN-HOUSE

**April 1993**
**Nvidia is founded by Jesen Huang and others at a diner.**

**Strictly speaking, PC gaming didn't start with *Doom*. Spiritually though, it absolutely did. *Doom* embodies so much of what would define PC gaming across the next three decades. Its cutting-edge tech established the PC's reputation as a premium gaming platform. Its immersive, satisfying gunplay made first-person shooters the PC's mascot genre. Its emphasis on violence and horror expanded the medium's reputation beyond a pastime for children. It even took the first steps toward online multiplayer.**

*Doom*'s influence on PC gaming cannot be overstated. Yet what's most remarkable about id Software's landmark shooter is its sheer sticking power. Far from being a fondly remembered relic, *Doom* is one of the most widely playable games in existence, having been ported not just to every gaming platform, but every piece of technology with a screen. Its engine, made open source in a truly visionary move by John Carmack, birthed the PC's unique, endlessly creative modding scene. *Doom* mods are still making waves today. There are even whole new games being made in *Doom*'s engine, like ambitious shooter *Selaco*, due out next year.

While *Doom*'s cultural omnipresence is remarkable, it can make it easy to lose sight of the game at the centre of it all, which remains a fantastic experience today. Although visually primitive by modern standards, mechanically it retains its delicate balance of weight, flow, and reactivity. Its weapon roster is still the blueprint for most single-player shooters, while its shotgun remains the baseline for all videogame firearms, and its 3D mazes still have much to teach about level design.

Moreover, for all the games that have imitated it, *Doom*'s distinctive atmosphere and pacing have proved oddly hard to replicate. Even its own follow-ups fell to either side of the original's distinctive blend of action and horror. Thirty years on, there is still something elusive at the heart of *Doom*, which more than anything else is what defines it as a masterwork.

**September 1994**
*System Shock* properly starts the immersive sim genre.

**October 1994**
Romero, Carmack and company release *Doom II* to incredibly positive review scores.

**For all the games that have imitated it, DOOM's distinctive atmosphere and pacing have proved oddly hard to replicate**

## June 1995
# E3 begins

**LOCATION** LA CONVENTION CENTER **ORGANISER** ENTERTAINMENT SOFTWARE ASSOCIATION

**To understand the significance of E3's arrival, you need to know how games were treated before E3, at other technology trade shows like CES. "In 1991, they put us in a tent," said Sega America's then CEO Tom Kalinske, "You had to walk past all the porn vendors to find us. That particular year it was pouring rain, and the rain leaked right over our new Genesis system. I was just furious with the way CES treated the videogame industry, and I felt we were a more important industry than they were giving us credit for."**

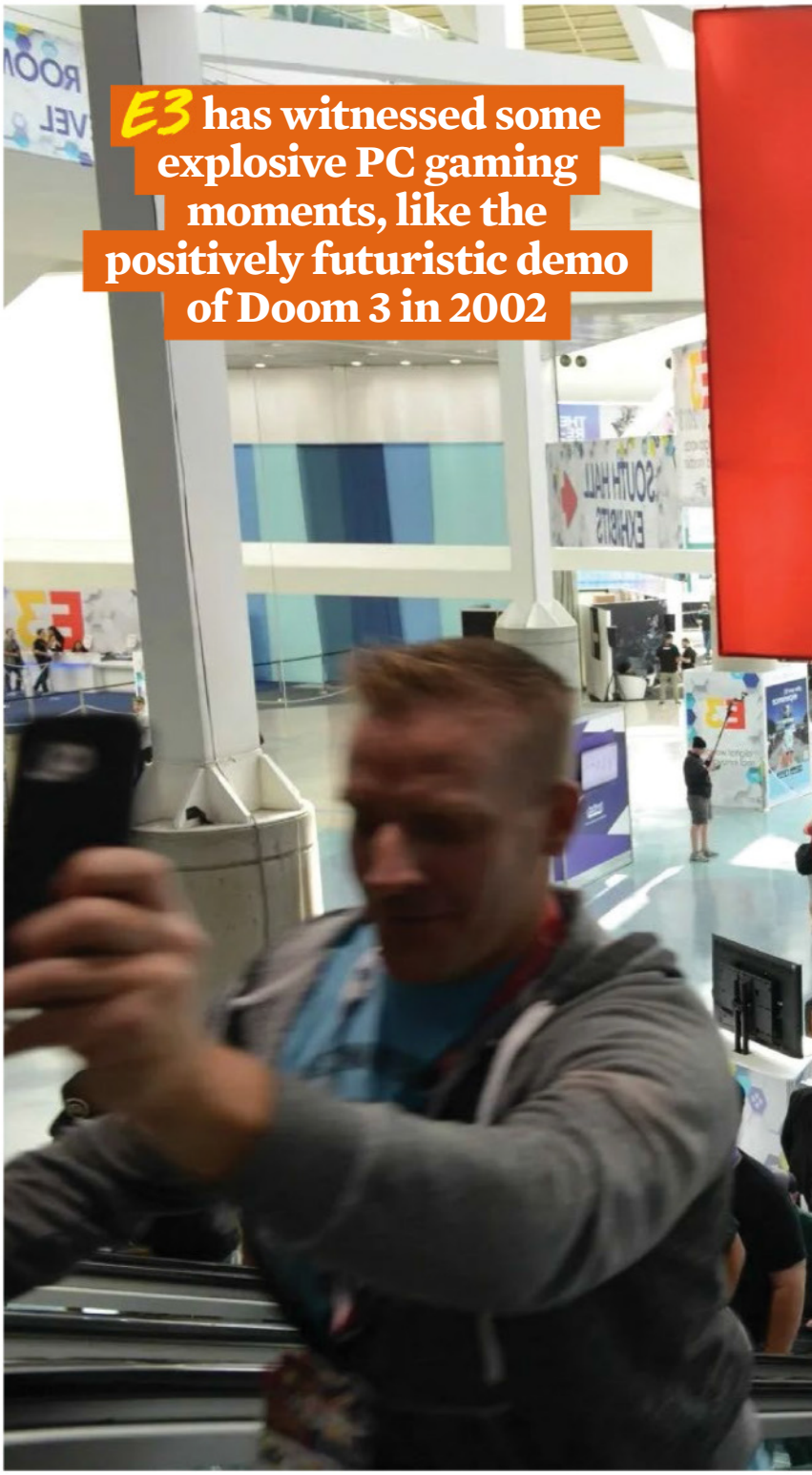
The first E3 was born as a response to this kind of treatment, a trade show designed to promote gaming's growing commercial and cultural significance, rather than obscure it. Held from May 11-13 at the Los Angeles Convention Centre, the first E3 saw exhibitions by the likes of Sega, Nintendo, Sony, Activision, EA, Capcom, Microsoft, and LucasArts. Showcased PC games included *Descent*, *Discworld*, *Wing Commander 3*, and *Syndicate Wars*.

Although technically a trade show meant for industry professionals, E3's cultural significance gradually broadened, gaining global public attention after the turn of the millennium. Simple game and console showcases morphed into extravagant stage presentations by big publishers. E3 could even affect how games were made, with huge amounts of developer resources being funnelled into making an E3 demo that would wow people. Having the public's eyes on E3 was something its organisers were dubious about, and between 2008 and 2010 the show was closed to all but handful of professionals, with attendance dropping by 90 percent.

Although largely dominated by console manufacturers, E3 has witnessed some explosive PC gaming moments, like the positively futuristic demo of *Doom 3* in 2002, and the hugely anticipated showing of *Half-Life 2* the following year. In 2015, the PC Gaming Show was launched in association with PC Gamer, bringing attention to all the fantastic PC games that don't have a massive publisher behind them.

In 2020, E3 was cancelled for the first time due to the Covid pandemic, and with the exception of an online event the following year, the show hasn't returned since. While there have been events in its place like Summer Games Fest, nothing has yet managed to replicate E3's collective celebration of videogames. We can only hope that it returns someday.

**February 1995**
The now famous *Star Wars: Dark Forces* first person shooter is released by LucasArts.



**April 1995**
Tim Schafer releases classic point-and-click *Full Throttle*.

**September 1995**
The first DirectX is released by Microsoft, making it easier to make and play PC games.

Image credit: ESA

## June 1996

# Quake

**DEVELOPER** ID SOFTWARE **PUBLISHER** GT INTERACTIVE

**October 1996**
The original *Tomb Raider* game is developed by Core Design, introducing hero Lara Croft.

**While there are many shooters like *Doom*, there's nothing quite like *Quake*. With its peculiar mix of gothic fantasy and industrial horror, id Software's 1996 shooter remains a singular entity in the annals of the FPS. Even its own developer has never revisited the series' original design, choosing instead to go down a more sci-fi route for the sequel.**

Perhaps that's because *Quake* was born from id Software's tensions as much as its talent. With a lengthy (for the time) development cycle, *Quake*'s creation was plagued by multiple redesigns and personality conflicts, culminating in John Romero's departure from the company. It's one of the earliest insights into the mounting pressures upon blockbuster game developers, which would only increase as ambitions, budgets, and development cycles ballooned.

Nonetheless, *Quake* is still a landmark entry in the gaming canon. Its true 3D graphics engine represented a huge advance over *Doom*. It was also the first id game to feature mouselook, bringing added responsiveness and verticality to its gunplay. Special mention should be given to Trent Reznor's buzzing, ominous soundtrack, which remains one of the most distinctive musical scores of any game.

Of course, *Quake*'s most significant contribution to the PC gaming landscapes was its multiplayer. John Carmack's revolutionary netcode made *Quake* playable across dial-up internet connections, paving the way for everything from *Counter-Strike* to *Call of Duty*. Its fast-paced, competitive deathmatch also saw the earliest pro gamers rise to prominence, like Dennis 'Thresh' Fong and Stevie 'KillCreek' Case, laying the groundwork for today's global esports scene.

## September 1997
# Ultima Online

**DEVELOPER** ORIGIN SYSTEMS/MYTHIC/BROADSWORD **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS

*Ultima Online* was to MMOs what *Doom* was to first-person shooters. It may not be the original massively multiplayer game, but it was the first to demonstrate they could have global appeal.

While *Ultima* takes place in a typical fantasy world, it's closer in spirit – mechanically speaking – to *EVE Online* than *World of Warcraft*, a player-driven sandbox with a dynamic economy and persistent housing for its players.

The game was also the scene of gaming's most famous instance of griefing, when Origin co-founder Richard Garriot's "Lord British" avatar was assassinated during a beta test. The more things change...

## October 1997
# Fallout

**DEVELOPER** INTERPLAY PRODUCTIONS **PUBLISHER** IN-HOUSE

When *Fallout* arrived in late 1997, the CRPG was dead. PC gaming was all about action and attitude in the '90s, and *Fallout*'s success came from channelling some of that attitude back into the RPG. Its satirical post-apocalypse and snappy branching narrative let players be a badass, a hardass, a dumbass, and every kind of ass in between.

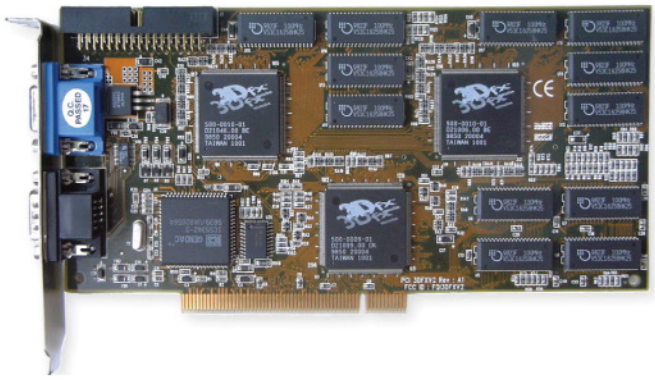
*Fallout*'s isometric perspective and adaptive quest design made it the template for the modern CRPG, and its legacy is still visible in games like *Baldur's Gate 3*.

## March 1998
# Voodoo2

**MANUFACTURER** 3DFX **CLOCK SPEED** 90MHZ

The Voodoo Graphics card from 3dfx introduced hardware acceleration in 1997, but it was the Voodoo2 that really showed what GPUs could do. Not only did it boost resolutions from 640x480 to 800x600, but you could pair two of them together to crank that up to 1024x768. The Voodoo2 also supported dual texturing per pixel, which made games like *Quake 2* and *Unreal* look phenomenal.

The Voodoo2 represented the most dramatic advancement in computer graphics since the advent of 3D, and catalysed the advancement of computer graphics across the next decade. Sadly, 3dfx wouldn't survive to see it.



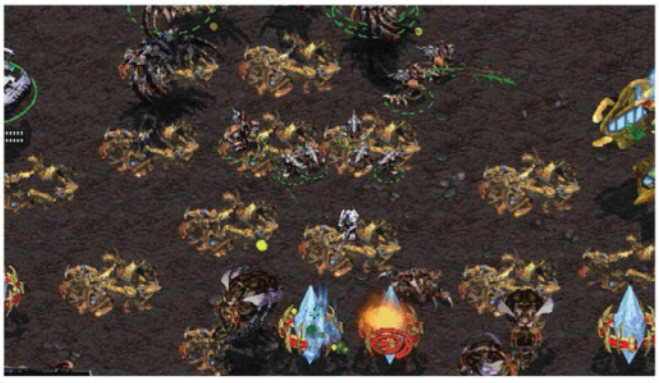
## March 1998
# StarCraft

**DEVELOPER** BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT **PUBLISHER** IN-HOUSE

Today *StarCraft* is best known for two things, its national following in South Korea, and the resulting esports scene. But there's a reason why *StarCraft* could capture the hearts of a nation: it's the RTS honed to perfection.

Blizzard took the fundamentals already refined in its *WarCraft* series, and transposed them into a vibrant sci-fi universe centred around three asymmetric factions.

Mastering their particularities is what kept players coming back for the next decade, and what ultimately made *StarCraft* one of the keystones of the nascent esports scene. Even after the colossal success of *StarCraft II*, the original remains reasonably popular in its spiritual homeland.



December 1998

## Thief: The Dark Project

**DEVELOPER** LOOKING GLASS STUDIOS **PUBLISHER** EIDOS INTERACTIVE

Looking Glass' gothic fantasy was a dedicated sneaking simulation. Its lighting system let players disappear into the shadows, while its advanced audio propagation meant every step you took had to be carefully considered. It also features some of the best 3D level design around. Missions like Assassins and The Sword have become key reference points in the level design handbook.

*Thief*'s framework would filter through to pretty much any game where the screen goes slightly darker when you crouch. Yet while countless games include stealth in their toolset, *Thief* remains the best dedicated stealth adventure in existence.

September 1999

## Age of Empires II: The Age of Kings

**DEVELOPER** ENSEMBLE STUDIOS **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT

Twenty years after its release, *Age of Empires 2* is still getting expansions. That's a testament to how universally beloved the historical RTS is. Age of Kings brought the series from the slightly stuffy classical era into the more popular Middle Ages, adding new features like advanced AI, improved isometric visuals, and the ability to build big-ass castles.

In more recent years, *Age of Kings* has received not one but two overhauls. The HD edition launched in 2013, while a *Definitive Edition* released in 2019, introducing new playable factions and new campaigns. Few games have stood the test of time this well.

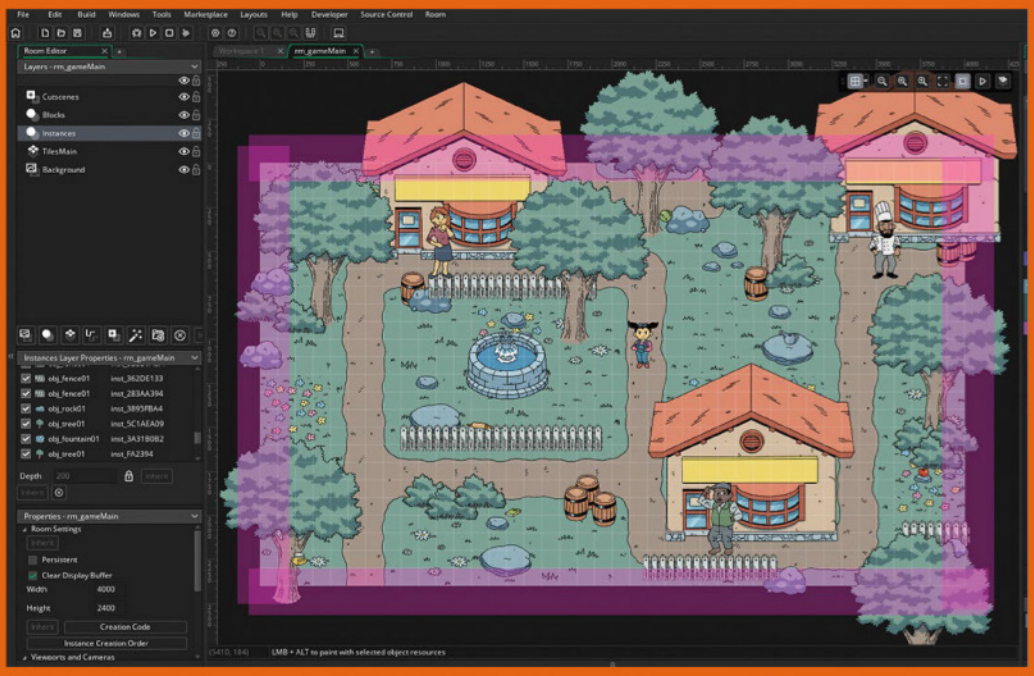
November 1999

## GameMaker releases

**DEVELOPER** YOYO GAMES **ORIGINAL PROGRAMMER** MARK OVERMARS

In the 1990s, there were two ways into game development. Either you learned to code, or you learned how to mod.

Then, in 1999, a Dutch scientist named Mark Overmars released a simple graphics tool called Animo. The tool gathered some attention, and Overmars began adding new features like a particle system and networking. He also changed its name to GameMaker, which in time would become emblematic of the democratisation of game development. Since 2007, GameMaker has been developed by Dundee-based company YoYo Games, and has been used to make games like *Hotline Miami*, *Gunpoint*, and *Undertale*.



**September 2000**
The now legendary B*aldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn* fantasy RPG is released by BioWare.



## June 2000
# Deus Ex

**DEVELOPER** ION STORM **PUBLISHER** EIDOS INTERACTIVE

***Deus Ex* represents the culmination of PC gaming's innovations throughout the 1990s. Here was a game that gave you the shooting of *Doom*, the sneaking of *Thief*, the ability to talk your way around a problem a-la *Fallout*, all in one astonishing package.**

It was a long-awaited triumph for the immersive sim, an offshoot of the RPG that emphasised systems-driven worlds designed to facilitate player agency. Immersive sims had been pioneered by Looking Glass Studios throughout the 1990s in games like *Ultima Underworld* and *System Shock*. Yet while beloved by those in the know, their commercial success had been negligible.

*Deus Ex* boasted greater ambition and flexibility than those games, but it also took place in a more relatable world. A near-future cyberpunk dystopia where every conspiracy theory you can imagine was true, *Deus Ex*'s world was governed by shadowy organisations, fought over by rogue AIs, and ravaged by a pandemic. In an age of online misinformation, its perspective on conspiracy theories can seem a little quaint, but it's also startlingly relevant in places. It has nuanced discussions about how power structures work, how government can slide into dictatorship, the problems of unregulated technology, the surveillance state, and so much more.

Sadly, *Deus Ex*'s success didn't lead to a new golden age of immersive sims. Yet it was influential enough to keep the flame alight, leading to several excellent follow-ups (and *Invisible War*) while also influencing games like *Dishonored* and *Cyberpunk 2077*. But the original remains the genre's best mix of intricate systems and insightful storytelling.

**DEUS EX's world was governed by shadowy organisations, fought over by rogue AIs, and ravaged by a pandemic**

## August 2001

# Windows XP

**DEVELOPER** MICROSOFT **PUBLISHER** IN-HOUSE

**Microsoft's Windows OS was transformative for PC gaming, offering a level of stability, compatibility, and accessibility that simply didn't exist in the days of DOS. Gone were the days of typing text commands to install and boot games, getting it wrong several times, then throwing your keyboard out the window.**

Although Windows 95 represents the key turning point from command lines to icons, Windows XP is Microsoft's crowning achievement in OS design. Its UI replaced the unsightly grey boxes of old with a sleek, colourful, and above all intuitive design. It overhauled the Start menu introduced in Windows 95, adding the two-column layout. It also introduced a bunch of new features like taskbar window grouping and fast user switching.

But what made XP such a triumph was its reliability. At a time when every PC game came with the risk that it might Just Not Work, XP proved remarkably compatible. Even games that were years old by that point, like *Quake* and *Half-Life*, would generally run without complaint.

XP was the first truly modern PC OS, and its quality is evident in its longevity. Microsoft continued official support for XP until 2012. By comparison, Windows 95's support ended just six years after its launch. XP's reliability helped power Microsoft through the embarrassment that was Vista. Even when the much-improved Windows 7 released, many users stuck with XP until the death.

**At a time when every PC game came with the risk that it might Just Not Work, XP proved remarkably compatible**

**May 2002**
Bethesda Game Studios releases *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* to huge critical success.

## September 2002

# Battlefield 1942

**DEVELOPER** DIGITAL ILLUSIONS CE **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS

**The turn of the millennium saw PC gaming ask itself two big questions. The first was "What if you could play multiplayer shooters in teams?" while the second was "What would it be like to fight in the Second World War?".**

*Battlefield 1942* answered both these questions simultaneously. In doing so, it spawned one of gaming's biggest franchises. *Battlefield* took the renewed interest in WWII spawned by Saving Private Ryan (and in the PC gaming sphere, *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*) combined it with the PC's rapidly advancing multiplayer capabilities that facilitated games like *Unreal Tournament*, *Counter-Strike*, and *Team Fortress*, and then massively blew out the scale.

Not only did it support whopping 64-player battles, but those players could traverse vast, open-ended maps in vehicles like tanks and planes.

The result was an unprecedented virtual cauldron for brewing player-driven action. A match of *Battlefield* was a thousand tales written and told simultaneously by amorphous groups of players. That time you took out a Stuka with an AA gun, or when you coordinated an armoured assault on a control point with your mates, or when you held off the German advance at El Alamein.

*Battlefield* has been a staple of PC gaming ever since, and while the quality of the individual games may vary, its core appeal has never diminished. Its influence is also undeniable, games like *PUBG* and *Apex Legends* owe an enormous debt to *Battlefield*'s open-ended multiplayer design, while even *Call of Duty* has taken a lesson or two from DICE in recent years.

**May 2003**
*Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* is released on PC half a year after debuting on console.

## May 2003
# EVE Online

**DEVELOPER** CCP GAMES **PUBLISHER** SIMON & SCHUSTER INTERACTIVE/CCP GAMES/ATARI

Many games promise freedom, but *EVE* is one of the few that truly commits to it. Launched as a space MMO with a player-driven economy and an emphasis on PvP combat, what has come to define it are the shenanigans of its player-operated corporations. *EVE Online*'s virtual history is riddled with ambitious heists, daring assassinations, elaborate spy-games, and enormous space battles. There have even been times when its players have taken the fight directly to the developers. It's a game built not just for the community, but around it, with developers CCP responding to players' actions and treating them as part of the design.

## October 2003
# Call of Duty

**DEVELOPER** INFINITY WARD **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION

Today *Call of Duty* is known for its world-conquering multiplayer. But in 2003 it was the cinematic campaign everyone was excited about. Hot off the heels of *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* and its recreation of Saving Private Ryan's Omaha Beach landing, designers Jason West and Vince Zampella created a new studio. *Call of Duty* cast *Allied Assault*'s filmic eye across three campaigns, fighting through the hedgerows of Normandy as the Americans, assaulting the bridges of Holland as the Brits, and enduring the carnage of Stalingrad as the Soviets. It was a thunderous airstrike of a game, and for better or worse, the FPS hasn't been the same since.

## September 2003
# Valve releases Steam

**PUBLISHER** VALVE **DEVELOPER** IN-HOUSE

Valve's distribution service was never intended to be the gaming bazaar that it is today. It was made to solve a simple problem, how to patch Valve's multiplayer games in the most efficient manner.

The earliest version of Steam had no store, no community features, and certainly no trading cards. It was also roundly hated at a time when most homes still lacked internet connections, and was seen as a draconian anti-piracy measure, a threat to the freedom of PC gaming.

Eventually, Steam would completely change how PC games are purchased, owned, played, and even made. All largely because of a certain game that arrived the next year.

## November 2004

# Half-Life 2

**DEVELOPER** VALVE **PUBLISHER** IN-HOUSE

**In history there are two game industries, the one that lived before *Half-Life 2*, and the one that woke up after it. *Half-Life 2* was the sum of all the FPS' aspirations. A realistic, contiguous 3D environment that saw players travelling through a vast and elaborate cityscape. A revolutionary physics engine that turned every object in the game world into a potential weapon. An endlessly inventive adventure in which every chapter brought new twists. A story told by characters who moved, talked, and acted like real people.**

Even at a time when shooters and first-person games were constantly breaking new ground, nobody had seen anything like *Half-Life 2*. It was so good that Valve, with all its collective brainpower, still hasn't figured out how to make a sequel to it.

The influence of *Half-Life 2* stretches as wide as it does deep. Without *Half-Life 2* there'd be no *Garry's Mod*, no *Dear Esther*, no *Portal*, and all the games those titles inspired. But by far *Half-Life 2*'s most significant impact was to make Steam a going concern. PC gamers may have hated taking their medicine before they could play the best game on the planet, but the additional install base *Half-Life 2* provided was the first major step in transforming Steam into the behemoth it is today, and by proxy, shunting the entire medium into a digital future. Not since *Doom* had there been a PC game that so fundamentally changed everything, and another wouldn't come along until *Minecraft*.

**It was so good that VALVE, with all its collective brainpower, still hasn't figured out how to make a sequel to it**

## November 2004

# World of Warcraft

**DEVELOPER** BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT **PUBLISHER** IN-HOUSE

**May 2005**
**The now infamous "Leeroy Jenkins!" battle cry video is released on Warcraftmovies.**

**_World of Warcraft_ is a bizarre videogame phenomenon, in that it both started and ended the MMO craze of the noughties. Every publisher wanted a piece of _World of Warcraft_'s action, but hardly any would come close to Blizzard's success. _World of Warcraft_ opened the gates to the MMO party, then kicked the arse of anyone who tried to touch the cake.**

What's especially remarkable about this is, before *World of Warcraft* launched, all eyes were on *Everquest 2*. At that time, SOE's *Everquest* was the best MMO going, and the sequel looked set to provide a substantial upgrade, with improved visuals and less punishing progression.

Admittedly, *Everquest 2* did all those things. *World of Warcraft* merely did them better. Blizzard took the lessons it learned from games like *Diablo* and *StarCraft* and used them to refine everything that made MMOs fussy and obscure. Its death penalty system was both lenient and imaginative, while its auction houses made trading items with other players a breeze. Alongside this was slicker storytelling and quest design, and state-of-the art PvP that divided players into two warring factions. You could even fly across the map on mounts like gryphons.

In the end, *World of Warcraft* just buried *Everquest 2*. And it would do the same for virtually every MMO that followed in its wake. While a few titles like *Guild Wars* and *Lord of the Rings Online* were innovative or illustrious enough to cobble together a reasonable following, so many more died quietly within a few years of launch. Only *Final Fantasy 14* has proved anything like competitive, and that's after the game was redesigned.

All the while, *World of Warcraft* kept on succeeding, with each expansion building upon the game's foundation, or in the case of addons like *Cataclysm* or *Shadowlands*, overhauling it entirely. Indeed, the game has changed so much that Blizzard released the original version again, for players who wanted to go back to its classic iteration. *World of Warcraft*: so good they launched it twice.

**WORLD OF WARCRAFT buried Everquest 2. And it would do the same for virtually every MMO that followed in its wake**

## April 2006

# Oblivion's horse armour

**STABLE** BETHESDA SOFTWORKS **PROTECTION LEVEL** PURELY COSMETIC

**May 2006**
The legendary *Hitman: Blood Money* is released by IO Interactive to great acclaim.

**In 2006 Bethesda was the most exciting game studio around. Its new RPG *Oblivion* had blown players away with its vast, beautiful, and endlessly surprising fantasy world. But Bethesda's popularity soon took a dent when it launched *Oblivion*'s first slice of additional content. This differed in two ways from previous expansions Bethesda had made, like *Tribunal* and *Bloodmoon* for its earlier title *Morrowind*. First, it was delivered entirely digitally. Second, it wasn't a new island to explore or adventure to tackle. No, it was a bit of armour for your horse.**

The stink this caused was unbelievable. While players weren't against paying for additional game content, the idea of shelling out money specifically for one in-game item was ludicrous. One commenter on the website 1UP around the time of release wrote, "I am going to pay a 'premium' for a nifty hat?" unwittingly predicting Valve's entire business plan for the 2010s.

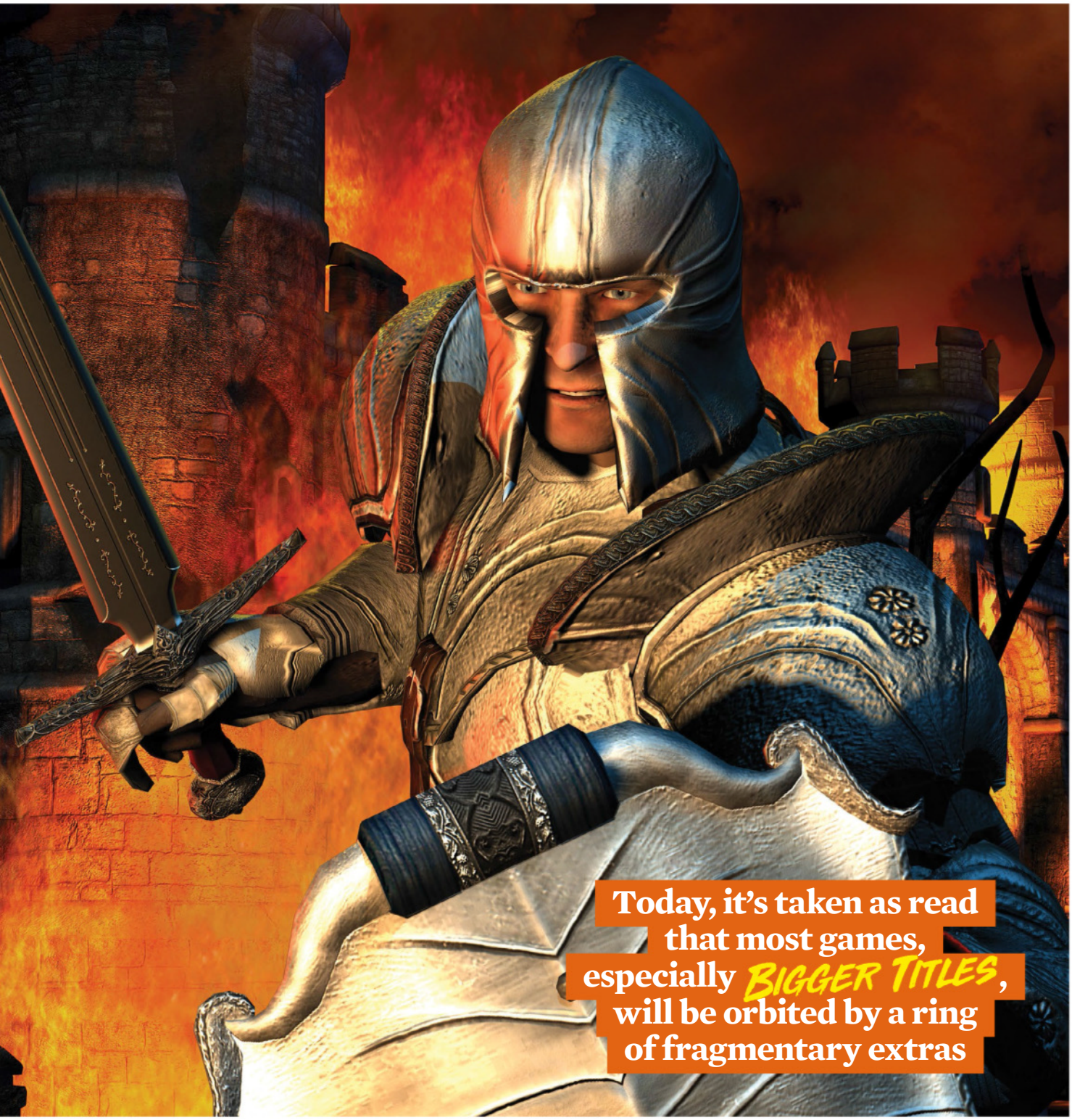
Looking back now, what's most remarkable is how mundane this all seems. Today, virtually every game has optional payable content, whether it's in the form of expansions, DLC, microtransactions, battle passes, season passes, or loot boxes. It's taken as read that most games, especially bigger titles, will be orbited by a ring of fragmentary extras. A paid item being entirely cosmetic is considered a good thing, as it means players aren't missing out on a potentially meaningful feature.

What changed? Well, partly this was normalised through sheer inundation, not just of payable DLC, but of games in general. As the volume and size of available games increased, the debate over smaller pieces of payable content seemed to matter less. When you've got three 80-hour open-world games on the go, plus 100 hours in a free-to-play shooter, the option to buy an extra suit in one of those games doesn't seem so offensive.

That said, paid extras can still be contentious. Loot boxes remain controversial due to the gambling element that plays into them. *Star Wars: Battlefront* (2017) was savaged for its cynical loot box implementation, a criticism that stained the game's reputation long after it was resolved. Which goes to show, you're only one shortsighted business decision away from becoming the next bit of horse armour.

**2006**
South Park's 'Make Love, Not Warcraft' TV episode airs.

**2006**
The first incarnation of *Garry's Mod*, a sandbox game using Valve's Source engine, arrives.



**Today, it's taken as read that most games, especially BIGGER TITLES, will be orbited by a ring of fragmentary extras**

## August 2006

# Dwarf Fortress

**DEVELOPER** BAY 12 GAMES **PUBLISHER** IN-HOUSE

**Never has a game been so simultaneously behind and ahead of the times as *Dwarf Fortress*. Released in 2006, *Dwarf Fortress* was a preposterously complex management sim at a time when management sims were out of vogue. It was a game fronted by impenetrable ASCII graphics, at a time when the industry was moving toward increased visual fidelity and streamlined interfaces.**

By all rights, *Dwarf Fortress* should had vanished into internet obscurity. At the same time, it's quite hard to ignore a game that generates an entire history of civilisation before you start to play. Notionally about building and managing a home for a colony of dwarves, *Dwarf Fortress* is really an impossibly complex story engine designed to factor in every possible eventuality. It's not just a game where your dwarves fight procedurally generated monsters in a procedurally generated land, but one where they have procedurally generated personalities and can write procedurally generated poetry.

*Dwarf Fortress* would go on to inspire other colony sims like *Prison Architect* and *RimWorld*. These games didn't have quite the same depth as *DF*, but were significantly easier to grapple with. All that changed late last year, however, when Bay12 released a new version of *Dwarf Fortress* sporting *gasp* hand-drawn graphics and *swoon* a user interface that supported a mouse. This made *Dwarf Fortress* significantly more accessible, and made Bay12's designers millionaires. All it took was 20 years building the most complex game ever made.

## October 2007

# The Orange Box

**PUBLISHER** VALVE **COLOUR** ORANGE

**Valve is a company that likes to solve problems, and in 2007 the problem was that none of its current projects – *Team Fortress 2*, *Half-Life 2: Episode Two*, and a weird experiment called *Portal* – really felt like a full game. But Valve realised each project filled in the gaps where the others fell short. So was born the greatest videogame anthology in history.**

Before launch, the headline act was *Episode Two*. Although *Episode One* hadn't been quite up to the same standard as *Half-Life 2*, *Episode Two* promised terrifying new enemies, advanced vehicular mechanics, and some big story twists.

Ultimately though, *Episode Two* proved the least exciting part of the box. *Team Fortress 2* brought a radical new aesthetic to Valve's *Quake*-mod-inspired shooter, one perfectly suited for the cartoonish chaos of a multiplayer FPS. But the most astonishing of the trio was *Portal*, which brought a genuinely revolutionary game mechanic to the table, packaged in a brilliantly brain-teasing puzzler overseen by one of gaming's greatest comic creations.

The legacy of *The Orange Box* isn't entirely without blemishes. Valve's handling of *Team Fortress 2* has been questionable, and *Half-Life 2* never did get a proper ending. Nonetheless, *The Orange Box* represents Valve at the height of its creative powers, and I'd give my little finger to see the company do something this bold again.

**November 2007**
RPG master BioWare releases the first *Mass Effect* game, which used Unreal Engine 3.

## May 2009
# Plants vs Zombies

**DEVELOPER** POPCAP GAMES **PUBLISHER** IN-HOUSE

Like *Peggle* before it, *Plants vs Zombies* was instrumental in the normalising of 'casual' games on PC. Valve's inclusion of a demo version of *Peggle* in *The Orange Box* had countless PC gamers paying attention to what PopCap would do next.

*Plants vs Zombies* showed that games you'd normally find free on Newgrounds.com could compete with shooters and RPGs as premium mainstream titles. Then PopCap was acquired by EA, and *Plants vs Zombies* disappeared into mobile-land. But the original's significance as a PC landmark remains. It's also the second-best game after *Portal* to finish on a song.

## September 2010
# Recettear: An Item Shop's Tale

**DEVELOPER** EASYGAMESTATION **PUBLISHER** CARPE FULGUR

You might not be familiar with *Recettear*, in which you play a young girl in a magical shop who explores randomised dungeons. But it's notable for being the first Japanese game to release on Steam.

Prior to this, the PC was rarely a focus for Japanese publishers. You'd occasionally see a port of a Capcom or Sega game, but that was it. Yet Steam revealed the PC market was too big to ignore. *Recettear* was the first crack in the dam, leading to everything from *Dark Souls* to *Yakuza*, *Persona* to *Nier Automata* arriving on the platform. You can even play *Shenmue* on PC now. What an age we live in.

## November 2011
# Minecraft

**DEVELOPER** MOJANG **PUBLISHER** IN-HOUSE

While *Minecraft* officially released in late 2011, it had already been a sensation for over a year. Its highly public alpha development is one of many reasons why Mojang's cubic omni-game was revolutionary, and there's a direct line from it to today's Early Access.

It also changed the types of games being made. *Minecraft*'s groundbreaking survival mechanics paved the way for titles like *DayZ*, *Subnautica*, and *Fortnite*, while its block-based building system directly influenced the likes of *Factorio* and *Satisfactory*. It's wild just how much of today's gaming landscape was shaped by *Minecraft*. A truly monumental PC game.

## November 2011

# The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

**PUBLISHER** BETHESDA SOFTWORKS **FUS RO** DAH

**Bethesda's finest hour. *Skyrim* combined the refinements of *Oblivion* with a less cod fantasy landscape inspired by Norse myth. The rugged mountains and misty valleys brought back some of the weirdness Bethesda had left behind in *Morrowind*. Also, it had dragons.**

The result was a perfectly balanced RPG brew. *Skyrim* had just enough sharpness in its combat and intuitiveness in its systems to give it mass-market appeal, but it also had sufficient flexibility and, let's face it, inherent wonkiness to make it an internet sensation in the golden age of social media. Buckets on heads! Oaths to carry burdens! A certain projectile in a leg joint! It was the same weirdness that had been in *Oblivion*, but unlike in 2006, it was a lot easier to share.

Which is not to say everyone loves *Skyrim* purely because of the memes. So much of *Skyrim*'s memetic potential derives from its openness, its willingness to let you bend and even break it. Nowhere is this more apparent than in *Skyrim*'s unrivalled mod scene. From new inventories to enhanced survival systems, novel quests to entire unexplored areas. Forget waiting for *The Elder Scrolls VI*, you could probably assemble a sequel yourself just out of *Skyrim* mods.

Since *Skyrim*, Bethesda's games have lost some of that openness. *Fallout 4* leaned far more heavily on its shooter credentials, while *Starfield* lacks a contiguous play-space capable of generating oddball moments. They're still decent adventures, but the sooner Bethesda gets back to *The Elder Scrolls*, the better.

**SKYRIM had just enough sharpness in its combat and intuitiveness in its systems to give it mass-market appeal**

## October 2012

# XCOM: Enemy Unknown

**DEVELOPER** FIRAXIS GAMES **PUBLISHER** 2K

**Firaxis' reboot of Julian Gollop's 1994 game (known variously as *X-COM: UFO Defense* and *UFO: Enemy Unknown*) is another one of those great pivot moments of PC Gaming. Before *XCOM*, turn-based tactics was practically a forgotten genre. But Firaxis brought it screaming back, blending cinematic flair with ruthless tactical challenge to create a gripping, dynamic sci-fi drama. *XCOM*'s tactical scenarios could deliver the kinds of shocking twists you'd normally experience in a TV show like Game of Thrones, only the characters being mercilessly slaughtered were ones you'd created, in situations you'd got them into.**

*XCOM* also fit right into the 2010s' renewed appetite for uncompromising experiences, a more cerebral companion to the high-wire athleticism of *Dark Souls*. Its alien menace wasn't afraid to just beat you, but to humiliate you too, and even the best outcomes came with losses. As such, completing a mission in *XCOM* always felt like a huge achievement. And winning a campaign? Well, pat yourself right on the back.

In the wake of *XCOM*, turn-based tactics went from forgotten genre to arguably the dominant strategy mode for the next decade, inspiring everything from *Gears Tactics* to *Invisible, Inc*. Turn-based tactics even began infiltrating other genres. Role-playing games like *Wasteland 2* and *Baldur's Gate 3* owe as much to *XCOM* as they do the CRPGs of the '90s. Going forward, the 2010s would see a string of highly successful reboots, including *Tomb Raider*, *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Doom*, but none of them were as transformative as Firaxis' tactical masterpiece. Hurry up Commander, we need you back.

**2012**
Valve releases tactical FPS *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*.

**2012**
Tim Schafer's *Broken Age* becomes real after raising over $3.45 million on Kickstarter.

**Its ALIEN MENACE wasn't afraid to just beat you, but to humiliate you too, and even the best outcomes came with losses**

**March 2013**

## Steam Early Access Starts

**DEVELOPERS** MANY

Although *Minecraft* first seeded the idea of paying for an incomplete game, it was Valve that formalised the concept. In March 2013, 12 games launched as part of Steam's Early Access programme, letting developers sell unfinished titles, using player funds and feedback to complete the project. The list included *ArmA 3*, *Kerbal Space Program*, and *Prison Architect*.

The idea of paying for unfinished games risked further fragmentation of games as a product, a process that had already begun with DLC and microtransactions. There was a fear developers might abuse the system to escape scrutiny, responding to criticism of flawed or poor design with "it's not finished", or simply taking the money and running.

And Steam Early Access *has* been misused on occasion. But, on the whole, has been a huge net positive for PC gaming. Of the 13 games that originally launched in Steam Early Access, three eventually ceased development, but ten saw full launches, and at least one, *Kerbal Space Program*, is among the greatest PC games ever made. That's not to mention all the brilliant games to emerge from Early Access since, like *Slay the Spire*, *Vampire Survivors*, and of course *Baldur's Gate 3*.

Rather than representing a threat to how games are made, Early Access acknowledges the highly iterative and collective nature of game development. Whether a game is finished or not comes down to one thing, the developer's choice, and Steam Early Access simply helped expand their options.

March 28, 2013

## Oculus Rift DK1

**MANUFACTURER** OCULUS VR

You could play a crude VR version of *Half-Life 2* on the Oculus Developer's Kit 1. It was grainy, it was disorienting, and it made some feel sick. But the Combine soldiers were actually human-sized, the vertical drops made stomachs lurch, and the headcrabs leaping at your face were terrifying.

In 2013, it felt like virtual reality would take over the world. Physical and economic limitations have prevented a VR revolution, but the tech is nonetheless a well-established part of PC gaming today. If nothing else, VR brought us a whole new *Half-Life* game, *Half-Life: Alyx*, every bit as brilliant as the first two.

November 2015

## Steam Link, Steam Controller, Steam Machines

**MANUFACTURER** VALVE

Valve first crossed the line from software developer to hardware designer with these three devices. It was Valve's first stab at building a console-like experience around PC gaming, without actually making a console. Unsurprisingly, this half-measured approach didn't catch on, and Steam Machines had all but vanished from Steam by 2018. That said, the Steam Link was a genuinely neat piece of hardware, and Valve's hardware aspirations would see much greater success in the years to come.

May 2015

## The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

**DEVELOPER** CD PROJEKT RED
**PUBLISHER** CD PROJEKT

Open worlds on PC reached their zenith with CD Projekt's dark fantasy. The scale of this RPG was extraordinary, but what truly defined *The Witcher 3* was the texture of its world. Its landscapes weren't just beautiful, they were wild and unkempt and hostile. Its story wasn't just dramatic, it was tender, nuanced, heartwarming and heartbreaking. The quality wasn't limited to the main plot, but virtually every side quest too. It may be a game about a mutant slaying monsters, but *The Witcher 3* is one of the most human games ever produced by a big-budget studio.

December 2017

# PUBG: Battlegrounds

**DEVELOPER** PUBG STUDIOS **PUBLISHER** KRAFTON

**Perhaps the most recent game to cause a paradigm shift in how mainstream titles are designed, *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* emerged from the inhumane chaos of *DayZ*, Bohemia Interactive's multiplayer zombie survival mod for *ArmA 2*. In *DayZ*'s world, survival was the only goal, and in achieving this you could be as cruel and treacherous to other players as you liked.**

*PUBG* basically took this idea and formalised it into a round-based scenario. The same large, post-military world, the same large number of players. But now players had to compete with one another in a gradually shrinking playspace until only one of them was left. And lo! The battle royale genre was born.

*PUBG*'s impact was as enormous as it was rapid. In the battle royale formula, Epic saw an opportunity to turn around the ailing fortunes of its *Minecraft*-inspired survival game *Fortnite*, creating one of today's biggest blockbusters. Respawn applied its unrivalled FPS talents to the formula, producing arguably the best battle royale game in *Apex Legends*. Even Activision stood up and took notice, building the hugely successful, if variably good *Call of Duty: Warzone*.

The success of battle royale lies in its balance of scale and accessibility. These games have the footprint of an MMO or a shared-world shooter, but don't demand the same commitment. They have events and seasonal changes, but don't require that you follow along with every step. Perhaps that's why battle royale has thrived in recent year, while so many looter-shooters and MMOs have struggled.

**The most recent game to cause a PARADIGM SHIFT in how mainstream titles are designed**

## September 2018

# Geforce RTX 2080

**MANUFACTURER** NVIDIA **CLOCK SPEED** 1515MHZ

**PC gaming has long been at the cutting-edge of graphics technology, but the rate at which visual fidelity increases has been flattening over the last decade. Back in the '90s, just four years took you from the 2.5D hellscape of *Doom* to the fully 3D, hardware-accelerated sci-fi nightmare of *Quake 2*. Then it all went quiet.**

Which is why the advent of ray tracing in 2018 felt like such a big deal. Here was a technology that seemed a genuine leap forward: true, path-traced real-time lighting that accurately simulates how light bounces off surfaces to create shadows, reflections, and refractions. Games had become very good at faking these things, but here was a technology that did it for real.

In practice, the ray-tracing revolution has been more of a spirited argument. The improvements ray tracing brings can often be hard to discern. Moreover, the performance cost for often slight improvements was enormous, and on early RTX cards like the 2080 were often not worth the enhancements they provided.

Modern ray-tracing also raises other questions, such as whether or not an all-purpose lighting solution is always beneficial for how games look. Yes, putting real-time lighting into games like *Quake 2* and *Minecraft* is a cool trick, but it also fundamentally compromises the aesthetic of those games. The recently released *Counter-Strike 2* uses old-fashioned baked lighting, and not only does it look fantastic, it looks fantastic in the way a Source engine game should. As is always the case, good technology is nothing without good implementation. That said, when it is used correctly, like in *Cyberpunk 2077*, ray tracing can be absolutely mindblowing.

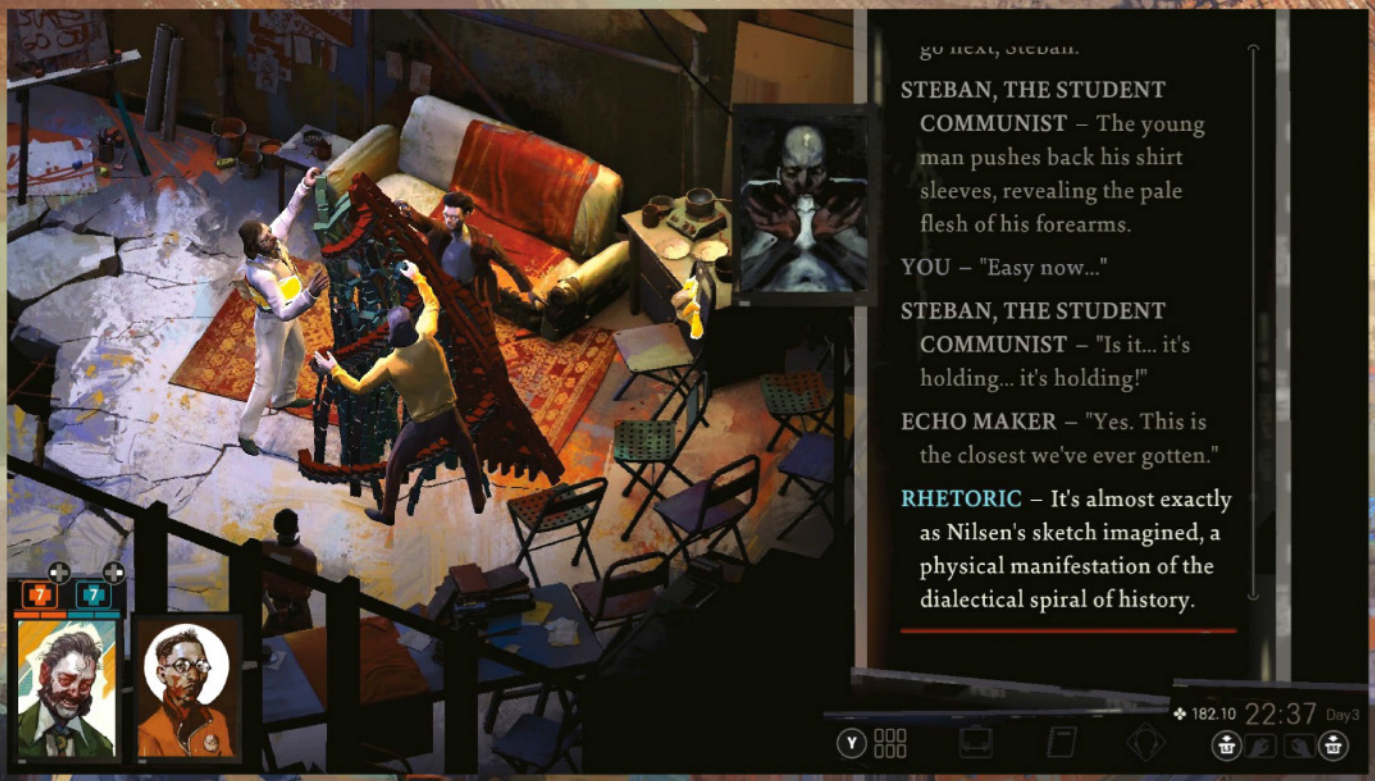
**2018**
Subset Games releases strategy game *Into the Breach*.

**December 2018**
The Epic Games Store is initially launched, proceeding to hand out free PC games each month.

**Here was a technology that seemed a genuine leap forward: true PATH-TRACED lighting**

**2019**
Nvidia launches version 1.0 of its DLSS AI upscaling tech.

**2019**
Keanu Reeves says "You're breathtaking!" while on stage at the E3 games show.




## October 2019

# Disco Elysium

**DEVELOPER** ZA/UM **PUBLISHER** IN-HOUSE

**Role-playing games inherently involve experimenting with alternate personalities. But few are as fundamentally about personal identity as *Disco Elysium*. The detective RPG from Slovakian developer ZA/UM plunges so deeply into your sense of self that your inner thoughts have inner thoughts. Playing as an alcoholic cop who goes on a bender so extreme it wipes his entire memory, you must solve the murder of a man found hanging in a tree while also solving the mystery of who the heck you are.**

Many RPGs have your character start out as a blank slate, but in *Disco Elysium* you are a shattered slate, your mind a million shards. Every character skill relates to a fragment of your disassembled self, and each of those has its own voice. Your logic skill, for example, will help you solve conundrums. Your electro-chemistry skill, by comparison, will go hog-wild whenever you spy drugs or alcohol, begging you to indulge. It's up to you which parts of your mind you listen to, and what kind of detective forms from that.

*Disco Elysium* combines this with a literary approach to narrative design that is both hilarious and achingly astute in its perception of its own dilapidated world. It's an expressly political affair. The game's central murder takes place in a city district living in the shadow of a failed communist revolution, the bones slowly being picked clean by corrupt unions and external capitalist interests. These politics play into your character too, with the game letting you affect various political stances and explore their ideologies, contradictions, and consequences.

It's a truly singular experience, although that description has gained more literal significance lately. The game's legacy has been marred by a split within ZA/UM between its creative director and the company's own directors and investors. That story is a messy one, but it ends with the sad truth that we're unlikely to see a sequel.

That makes *Disco Elysium* all the more unique, a reminder that good RPG design is about the paths you give a player to follow, not the amount a real-estate available to explore. If more recent events are anything to go by, it's an idea that might be catching on again.

The CENTRAL MURDER takes place in a city district living in the shadow of a failed revolution

**2019**
4A Games releases the third instalment in its *Metro* series of FPS games, *Metro Exodus*.

## January 2020

# The Covid-19 pandemic

**DEVELOPER** SARS-COV-2 **PUBLISHER** HUMANITY

**Covid-19 affected virtually every individual and organisation on the planet, and the games industry was no different. But the effect of the virus and the ensuing lockdowns to help protect people from it was unusual in the case of games. Covid-19 caused serious disruption to game development schedules as studios adjusted to working from home. But it also caused a massive spike in sales of games and hardware, due to the millions of additional people passing time during lockdown by playing games.**

The consequences of all this are still playing out today. The delays Covid caused meant fewer games being launched in the following two years, while 2023 has seen a bumper release calendar as all those delayed games finally reached completion. On the other hand, the massive spike in gaming revenue has also flattened, resulting in widespread layoffs as companies looking to exploit short term gains during the pandemic now seek to downsize their operations to maximise their profit. It's a sharp reminder that, while business has always partly driven gaming as an artform, for some, it is exclusively a moneymaking machine.

One positive that emerged from the pandemic, however, is an increased awareness of the risk of exploitation on the part of game developers. The post-pandemic years have seen numerous unions created at developers like Blizzard and Raven Software, with the aim of protecting workers' rights. One of the less expected effects of the pandemic was to change how people view their relationship with work, and the game industry is still wrestling with what that means for the future.

Image credit: Fotografia Inc

## February 2021

# Valheim

**DEVELOPER** IRON GATE STUDIO **PUBLISHER** COFFEE STAIN PUBLISHING

Any game that brings together the building and survival systems of *Minecraft* with the exploration and combat of *Dark Souls* always had a reasonable shot at being popular, but nobody expected Iron Gate's procedural Viking simulator to become the phenomenon that it has. As well as being the perfect capstone to the design ideas that drove the 2010s, *Valheim*'s popularity derives from being such an excellent hangout space. Its atmospheric Viking world is highly rewarding to explore with other players, and while the game bills itself as a hardcore survival experience, for the most part the only pressure is that which you choose to take on.

## March 2022

# Steam Deck

**MANUFACTURER** VALVE

Valve's answer to the Nintendo Switch is a miniature marvel of engineering, a compact yet deceptively powerful handheld that combines the portability of a handheld with the flexibility of a PC.

The success of the Steam Deck was undoubtedly assisted by launching at an opportune moment. High-end games were scarce in 2022, making it an ideal time to reunite with old favourites and catch up with the hottest indie games. The Steam Deck also happened to release alongside the perfect gaming companion, Poncle's simple yet enormously compulsive *Vampire Survivors*. This year's calendar of wall-to-wall blockbusters has been less well suited to the Steam Deck, but it's still a fantastic bit of hardware, and a tinkerer's delight.

## August 2023

# Baldur's Gate 3

**DEVELOPER** LARIAN STUDIOS **PUBLISHER** IN-HOUSE

Receiving a whopping score of 97 from PC Gamer, *Baldur's Gate 3* epitomises how the PC's most traditional genres can still surprise after 30 years. This magnificent CRPG blends world-class writing, acting, and storytelling with challenging turn-based combat that brilliantly adapts D&D's toolset. Not only is the game's central narrative preposterously flexible, the world is also highly responsive to your actions.

A stone cold all-timer, it's hard to know yet what impact *Baldur's Gate 3* will have. But you can guarantee it's under the microscope of every major game developer.

## September 2023

# Cyberpunk 2077 2.0

**DEVELOPER** CD PROJEKT RED **PUBLISHER** CD PROJEKT

CD Projekt has long held a reputation for improving its games post-release, but *Cyberpunk* seemed like an insurmountable task. Alongside a list of bugs and performance issues were more fundamental problems, like underwhelming progression and a gorgeous, but lifeless, city.

Yet CD Projekt was true to its rep, and while it took three years and a countless number of eddies, the studio really did fix *Cyberpunk*. It's now as entertaining mechanically as it is narratively, while the world feels more alive thanks to better crowds and a proper police system. The *Phantom Liberty* expansion provides further enhancements, alongside a new story that's a superb complement to the original.

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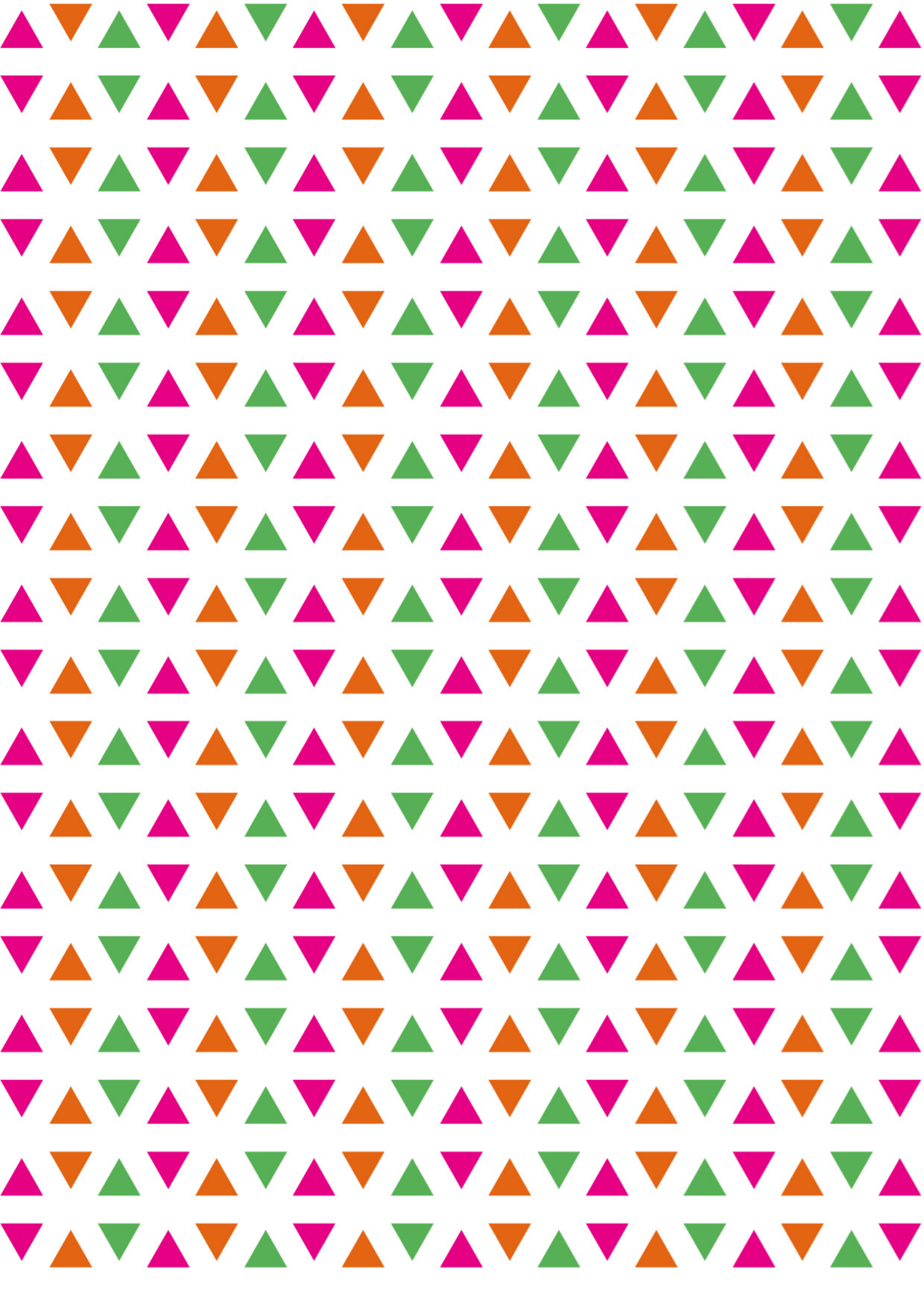

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